



# SLAVES OF THE RING

BY

THE AUTHOR OF "WOMAN'S RANSOM"



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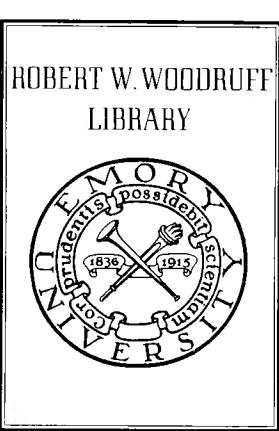
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 33, :  
 35 C  
 36 T  
 37 P  
 38 B  
 39 A  
 40 I  
 41 C  
 42 R  
 44 S  
 45 E  
 46 J  
 47 Mr. and Mrs. Asheton " Margaret and Her Bridesmaids."  
 48 Sir Jasper Carew Charles Lever.  
 49 Mrs. Mathews Mrs. Trollope.  
 50 Marian Withers Geraldine Jewsbury.  
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# SLAVES OF THE RING;

BY

FREDERICK WILLIAM ROBINSON,

AUTHOR OF

“GRANDMOTHER’S MONEY,” “WILDFLOWER,” “UNDER THE SPELL,”  
“MR. STEWART’S INTENTIONS,” ETC., ETC.

“Le plus libre du monde est esclave à son tour.”—THEOPHILE.

“Let none too hastily conclude that all goodness is lost, though it may for a time be clouded and overwhelmed.”—RAMBLER.

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1867.

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## BOOK I.

FOLLINGAY FARM.

“What is he, for Heaven’s sake? Can no man  
Give him his true character?”

HEYWOOD.

“A rolling stone is ever bare of moss;  
And to their cost, green years old proverbs cross.”

AMBROSE PHILIPS.



# SLAVES OF THE RING.

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## CHAPTER I.

“WELSDON IN THE WOODS.”

I HAVE a story to tell. Neither a quiet, nor an untroubled, nor a short one. I have been a long while making up my mind to write this story, but lo ! the plunge is made, and I have enough perseverance, or dogged obstinacy, in my nature to fight through it. It is a record of four years—a brief span to most of us—to me all the loves, joys, and sorrows of my life. A bold assertion, for I am only six-and-twenty, with hair ungrey, a heart subject to the usual palpitations, and an enemy or two still in the flesh to confront me.

Still I fancy my romance has vanished away, and that, in those four years referred to, I lived the life of most men. I made my best friends and my worst therein ; I saw the turning-point, for good or evil, of more lives than my own ; I fought a battle wherein I might have been stronger, and yet wherein I might have given up and died. But the battle is over, the wounds are healed, and I am sitting here a scarred warrior, to tell of the fight—of the friends for and against me—of what a grand dash at the enemy that last charge was—who fled and who were left behind on the field, quiet and still, with the white stars looking down upon them !

It is a story of four years, I reiterate, and it began in an old-fashioned, picturesque English village, which I will call Welsdon in the Woods. What Welsdon in the Woods resembles at the time in which my story commences, and what business I wanted there, will appear in the regular action of this narrative, on the threshold of which I am not inclined to linger.

It was a June evening, close, dark, wet, and sultry, when I sat in the principal room of the principal inn of the village of Welsdon in the Woods. A low-ceilinged, angular room, with two ugly mould candles trying to look cheerful under difficulties, and bringing into strong relief the rain-drops on the other side of the window panes, across which the landlady's daughter—barmaid, chambermaid, and waitress—had forgotten to draw the red curtains. However, this was an omission which I altered my mind about rectifying; drawing the window curtains shut me in with a dusty flycatcher, two candles, a farmer's almanack, a teaboard, a *Visitors' Book*, fourteen editions of Watts's *Hymns*, and a Goldsmith's *History of England*, with all the royal heads painted blue by a juvenile amateur; leaving the curtains undrawn, afforded me a view of the night, and the night's landscape—a dark sky, a low hedge, dimly distinguishable, some trees, and a never-ending, hurrying, rattling descent of rain.

Still this was a relief to the room, which haunted and oppressed me. Had not my clothes been already saturated in a journey from the railway station, in an open fly, to the "Haycock Inn," I might have risked waking up the good folk at the Follingay farm, by leaving the dreary shelter wherein I had dined and taken my ease. But the landlady's daughter had assured me that the "Follingay people" were dead to the world after nine P.M., and that a dog of an extra degree of fierceness was turned loose, to prey upon intruders at that hour, and was only too glad to have a chance of a nibble.

And it was striking nine when I had finished my dinner at the "Haycock," and the rain was beating heavily against the glass, and the slippers of a *Glumdalclitch* were on my feet; and perhaps this gloomy shelter *was* better than attempting to finish my journey, after all.

I thought so when it was chiming half-past nine; and, when despairing of the room again, I was turning once more with a slight shiver to the window—from which I jumped away rather suddenly; for as my face pressed itself close to the glass, for a better view of the damp state of all sublunary things, I became aware of a second face—not a reflex of my own—as closely fixed to the exterior of the pane, and peering anxiously into the room.

I had recovered my composure, and was considering the matter, when the person who had startled me was ushered into my presence by the landlady's daughter.

“This is the best room we have, Sir.”

“And this will do very nicely, my dear.”

The landlady's daughter took her departure in a rigid manner—it was not the flying compliments of her mother's guests that were calculated to flatter her. And yet the newcomer, who had thus familiarly addressed her, was a young and a handsome man, and wore a black moustache, which, by the way, was more of a novelty in 1856 than in the present year of grace.

“Did I frighten you?” he said, turning with a half-laugh to me.

“You startled me for the moment—I am not easily frightened.”

“I had been watching you for three minutes at least—thinking how very comfortable you looked there in the dry.”

“The elements of comfort are few, too.”

“Perhaps you are particular, and expect too much from the requirements of a country inn?”

“Fortunately I am not used to inns.”

“Unfortunately I am,” he said, with a half-yawn.

He had disengaged himself of a waterproof coat and leggings, and was now coolly using the top bar of the empty fire-grate by way of extempore boot-jack. For one used to inns, he seemed strangely indifferent to the manners and customs thereof.

“I thought these boots would have stood anything,” he soliloquised, holding them at arm's length, “but your part of the country has a shoemaker's interest at heart.”

"This is not my part of the country," I remarked quietly.

"Oh ! I beg your pardon."

He touched the bell by the mantelpiece, and then subsided into a hard leathern chair, ironically christened "easy," and stretched two long legs to their fullest extent.

"A pair of slippers, if you please, and a glass of brandy and water."

"Yes, Sir."

"I should like the waterproofs hung up, and the boots greased—not dried, Mary. And I shall require a bed here to-night."

"Yes Sir."

"Unless," he corrected, "you can assure me, on the honour of a pretty waitress, that the good people at Follingay farm keep late hours, and are likely to receive a weary traveller ?"

"They are early people, Sir."

"Oh ! very well. Oh !—and Mary, my dear."

"Sir."

The young lady was emphatic, and essayed to "look down" the new-comer. The effort was a failure, although the intention was good ; and the new-comer seemed somewhat elated at having embarrassed her.

"I gave a carpet-bag to a shock-headed clodhopper at the door ; see that he takes it to my room, please."

"Yes, Sir."

"And you will not forget the boots and waterproof. I believe I intimated that the waterproof habiliments will *not* require greasing. Oh—and Mary, my dear."

"Well, Sir," with a short sharp snap, that told of Mary's patience waxing low.

"I think I will have the brandy in its native condition, upon second consideration."

Exit Mary, with a half slam to the door.

"Nice people here. What I call a good house," remarked the stranger.

I had turned to the window during this colloquy, and become interested in the weather again. The stranger's manner was not a pleasant one, and I had not cared to be too close an observer of it. It had struck me that a well-

ordered being would have proceeded at once to his room, or have refrained from annoying the waitress when his style of address was seen to be objectionable ; and as I fancied that he was striving to afford me a little amusement in a quiet way, I had turned my back on the scene to evince my distaste.

My companion lounged in his chair, yawned, stretched his arms, and regarded me silently for some five minutes or more, during which period his slippers had been brought, and the liqueur glass of brandy placed on the table before him. Whilst I studied the weather, he sat and studied the fit of my coat, or the cut of my back hair ; at all events, I was convinced that his eyes steadily took me in, and flinched not from their object.

He was the first to break silence.

“Take care you don’t get another fright, Sir,” he said, with a sly irony that made me knit my brows a little.

“I will take care.”

“There are some more vagabonds and outcasts about ; one black-muzzled thief looked suspiciously at my carpet-bag as I came in. Heigho,” with another yawn, “that must be a dreary look-out of yours.”

“Shall I draw the curtains ? ”

“Not on my account, but—it *is* a trifle dull ! ”

Conscious of being bad company, and a little ashamed of my churlishness on so early an acquaintance, I drew the curtains across the window, and then sat down and faced my companion.

We took stock of each other again. Yes, he was a handsome man, if as olive-skinned and dark-eyed as a Spaniard. Six feet in height, of a good figure, and not more than five-and-twenty years of age, he was a man who could bear criticism or comparison. There was something of the gentleman in him, too, despite the acrid vein which he had already exhibited ; despite even his dress, which was of a faded fashionableness, and frayed in many places. In the midst of the carelessness, even slovenliness, of the man, one could detect, almost intuitively, a man habituated to a higher society than the best room of the “Haycock” was likely to afford. At least, this was my first impression. I set

it down here in the time and place that it occurred to me.

“May I ask if you are making a tour in these parts?” he said, when I had assumed a more sociable position.

“No, I am here on business.”

“You know but little of the place, then?”

“Very little at present. I arrived here by the 8.40 train.”

“You gained the start of me—that was my train.”

“Indeed!”

“Singular that two promising young men should be steering for one point of the compass on the same day and at the same hour, and both with no thoughts of pleasure in their minds. Fate surely intended us to be more intimately acquainted, or it would not have brought us *face to face* so suddenly. You were the gentleman who hired the only fly in attendance at the station, and left me to walk two miles and a half through a quagmire. Well, it suited my means, and curbed the extravagant fit that was on me. Do you smoke?”

“Occasionally. For company’s sake.”

“Then for company’s sake favour me.”

He drew forth a cigar-case and pushed it across the table towards me. I was inclined to regard the stranger in a more favourable light after this little act of friendliness—moreover, the cigar was a good one, and I had inherited my dear, dead German father’s love for the weed. My companion *grew* upon me—he was sharp, possibly even curious, in his inquiries, but he seemed far from anxious to wrap his own actions in mystery—and before that evening closed, as the reader will see, I had learned a great deal of his antecedents.

“You were speaking of the Follingay farm some time since,” said I; “may I ask if you are acquainted with the Gennys?”

“I hope to be,” was the reply; “I am about to study high-farming, or low-farming, or both, for four months or so. Just an insight into the mysteries of making money out of a few nine-acre fields.”

“A farm-pupil?” I said.

“N—no, that is too much hard work for a man who has scarcely made up his mind to a profession.”

“It is late in the day to be still unresolved.”

“Say it is late in the day to be cut adrift from home-ties by a Spartan-souled father.”

“Oh ! I——”

“Don’t apologise, my dear Sir,” said he hastily ; “you have touched no tender point in my anatomy, and these sorts of things,” with an easy wave of his hand, “happen every day. Possibly you spring from a quiet, even-tempered family, and a mutinous household is a mystery to you. Your father don’t threaten to cut you off with a shilling, or turn you out of doors twice or thrice a-week, because you’re no puppet to be led hither and thither as an unsympathising mind may dictate. Well, the shilling came at last, and to the back of young hopeful banged the patrimonial wainscot—and ‘behold me here !’ ”

“Your father and you will soon be on good terms again.”

“How long wilt thou give us, O prophet ? ” he asked, melodramatically.

“Three or four weeks.”

“It has already lasted three or four years,” he answered with a laugh, neither harsh nor forced, but a pleasant and easy laugh, that certified to his enjoyment of my surprise.

I was startled.

“I was not aware that the family feud was of long standing. I am sorry to hear of this cruel difference existing between two so closely allied.”

“Ah ! you have a father cast in a different mould—he——”

“Pardon me—he is dead ! ”

“I see.”

My companion hastened to change the topic.

“What do *you* know of the Follingay people ? ”

“Nothing.”

“That’s strange, too. You are bound to the farm ? ”

“Yes.”

“As farm-pupil ? ”

“Yes.”

"Well, it is satisfactory to know that one will not be entirely stranded," said he, "that there will be one civilised being to cling to in the midst of an ocean of 'roughs.' You intend to try farming in earnest?"

"Yes."

"A strange wish of yours."

"It was my father's wish that I should at least attempt farming."

"You come into money—or a farm, perhaps—at one-and-twenty?"

It was a shrewd guess. There was a little farm in the Vale of St. John, Cumberland, that awaited my coming and possibly my management—the last gift of a father who had been generous with his gifts all his life.

"I shall be the owner of a small farm at one-and-twenty."

"In six months time, I take it," said he, keenly studying my face.

"I am twenty-one next January."

"You are tall and strong for your age—but you will excuse me, you don't seem cut out for a farmer."

"I shall try and like the business."

"Try!—ah! then the heart joins not in the work?"

"I have said that I follow a wish of my father's."

"You are a dutiful son. Surely your days will be long in the land, if there be any faith in Bible promises."

"Do you doubt them?"

"I have not studied the matter," he said evasively—"it is a far-away study, and I remember half-a-dozen dutiful sons who died of consumption. Perhaps they were extra-dutiful, and so were made angels of."

I did not answer. The mocking vein was not pleasant to me at any time; from a man who mocked so bitterly it was more than usually objectionable.

"As we are likely to become better acquainted, may I ask your name?" he said.

"Alfred Neider."

"Are you a German?"

"I am a German by birth, an Englishman by education."

"You've rather a hard German forehead, but I should not

have thought you of foreign extraction ; and I have known hosts of Germans too—of the first class in Berlin, and of no class at all in Leicester Square.”

“ My mother is an Englishwoman.”

“ Ah ! that explains matters. And now to clear away a little more of the brushwood between us—my name is not Norval or Neider, but Thirsk. Pretty name, is it not ? ”

“ It’s a matter of taste. I don’t like it.”

He laughed.

“ Spoken like a bluff burgomaster—but it’s all that I have left in the world, Neider, and you must not disparage it. An honest and spotless appellative, which he that filches from me ‘ would leave me poor indeed ! ’ ”

“ You will excuse me repeating your own phrase—but you don’t seem cut out for a farmer, Mr. Thirsk.”

“ I hate the country—I always did ! ”

“ But—”

“ But I pay Mr. Genny forty pounds to be initiated into all farming mysteries—the last forty pounds I have in the world. Will you read me that riddle, Mr. Neider ? ”

“ It is too deep for me.”

“ Perhaps my father has also a farm, to bequeath a poor devil in his will.”

“ You don’t think the gulf between you too wide to bridge over, then ? ”

Mr. Thirsk’s black eyebrows knit almost bravo-fashion over his eyes, and he paused with his small glass of brandy half-way to his lips.

It was a peculiar expression of countenance—dark and repelling—but it had vanished in an instant, and he was smiling and satiric again.

“ Oh ! I am an only son, and always ready to forgive. If only to spite my upstart country cousins, I would cry ‘ Peccavi—father forgive me—cut the throat of the fattest calf you can find, and bury me, *a la Danae*, in gold flakes ! ’ My dear Sir, I am not a malicious man ; I am ready to forgive the whole world—for a consideration.”

“ Easy principles of the ‘ every-man-has-his-price ’ order.”

“ Or principles of a stagey order—or no principles at all. Do you make me out ? ”

“Upon my word, I have not attempted,” said I, laughing.

“Well, I’m not a mystery man, and I object extremely to a halo of mystery round me. I give you my character, fairly labelled—such as the world and a tight-fisted father has made me.”

I fancied that he looked very intently towards me, as if solicitous that his frankness should impress me; but there was an affectation of ease in all he said and did, that suggested the idea of a deeper channel, in which moved a character very different to that which he had taken some pains to describe. He was over-frank that evening, or I was over-critical; I did not think then that it mattered to me very much which was right. I knew that he was pleasant company, and that the last hour had sped almost imperceptibly away.

“What is the time?” he asked, as I looked at my watch.

“Eleven. I think I shall adjourn to my room.”

“We shall have early hours enough forced upon us at Follingay farm. Another glass, Mr. Neider, to our better acquaintance?”

“As you will. But I fear we are keeping up the good people of the ‘Haycock.’”

“That’s considerate. By Jove!” with a hearty laugh “that is the height of consideration. Haven’t they their price, as well as we have. Shan’t we discover that in the bill of to-morrow?”

He rang the bell, and ordered two glasses of brandy, and—“the hot-water jug as before, Mary, my dear.”

“That girl vastly amuses me,” said he, as she retired with precipitation, after receiving the order; “she’s a sensitive plant, who hates familiar addresses. And she takes such pains to show you how you have outraged her feelings, that you want to repeat the experiment, by way of diversion. A horribly demonstrative girl, reared on all these Watts’s Hymns—ugh!”

The brandy and water brought, and “Mary, my dear,” thanked for her attention—chiefly consisting in slamming the door, which Mr. Thirsk invariably opened after her—we composed ourselves again for a second discussion.

A discussion that was never commenced, for through

the open door the landlady's daughter was heard at high words in the tap-room across the passage.

"Hollo!" said Thirsk—"Miss Verjuice wreaking her venom in a new direction—where speaking her mind does not interfere so much with the profits of this glorious old inn. Do you mind studying country life from this distance?"

"Is it worth studying just now?"

"I don't know. Miss V. speaks in a rich falsetto, and I think intends a few of her cutting remarks for our ears. Hist!"

Mr. Thirsk was right, I was inclined to believe; for, as we sat silently smoking our cigars, certain portions of the young lady's "piece of mind" might have applied to us with equal precision.

"Hulking here at this time of night, and keeping people out of their beds and—and drinking nothing. Why don't you go home and sleep, Ricksworth?"

"I—I object to the old woman!" responded a hoarse voice.

"But we want to shut up—we're burning candles and wasting time, and we've no customers after ten—never! You're no good to us here, and you're no good to yourself—you never were, for that matter."

"Right you are. But whose fault be that? Warn't the world allus agin me—damn it!—ain't it allus tried to floor me?"

"There, there, we know all about that. Get up now, Mr. Ricksworth, and go home."

"Mr. Ricksworth. Well, you are the politest young dan—dam—dam—sel that I've had the elegantest satisfaction to meet, come last Follingay fair. Mr. Ricksworth!"

"Are you going?"

"Now my darter Mercy is up at the great house, there's no comfort in going home to big Bibles, and big bits of tongue—it ends in my temper spiling, and my flooring the old woman with this ugly black fist of mine."

And crash came the fist aforesaid on a deal table, with a violence that made the shaky foundations of the "Haycock Inn" vibrate again. The landlady's daughter screamed, and evidently made for the door, at which she stood and

told Mr. Ricksworth that he ought to be ashamed of himself, and that if he did not go home directly she should call the ostler to make him. She didn't want his custom—she had never wanted his custom—and the sooner he left Welsdon in the Woods the better for society in general—to all of which Mr. Ricksworth replied that he was waiting for the old woman. She'd fetch him—rely upon it, she'd be round to the "Haycock" to fetch him!

And before the dispute had ended, sure enough the old woman—a tall, angular old lady, in a clean cotton dress, an enormous straw bonnet, and a pair of pattens—came clicking into the inn passage, and making for the tap-room door.

"Peter Ricksworth," she cried imperatively.

And a "There, didn't I tell you so!" recorded the satisfaction of a man whose words had come true to the letter.

"I said you were a-coming, my dear."

"I'd a-come a couple of hours ago, you guzzling vagabond, an' I hadn't a-been detained."

"Thank'ee, my dear—thank'ee!"

"I hope he hasn't a-been a-troubling you much, Miss Morton?"

"He's been a great trouble, as usual, Mrs. Ricksworth," was the pert reply.

"It's a lie!" was the uncourteous comment.

"There—come home with you!"

"And who's kept you, Sarah, from fetching me—and I a-waiting so long here by myself?"

"Robert Genny."

"What! come to Welsdon?"

"Yes—come to Welsdon."

"Good Lord!—that's odd."

"What's odd, stupid?"

"Just as I ha' been thinking of him to-night over my pipe—the young scamp. Just as I ——"

"Come on!"

Mr. Ricksworth was evidently jerked by the collar, and brought nearer the tap-room door. There was a scuffling of feet, and then Mrs. Ricksworth and her charge were in the passage, and passing the door of our room. My companion

and I both looked instinctively towards the gentleman who had been a trouble to lure homewards, and his vacant, restless gaze wandered to the room wherein we sat. To my astonishment, at least, he paused, and the look in his blood-shot eyes became more intent and eager.

“Hollo, young gentlemen, hollo !”

Neither of us replied. I looked towards Thirsk, who was smoking complacently.

“I’ve seed you before, you know !” said Ricksworth, nodding towards him.

“Oh ! have you ? Good-night.”

He was a tall thin man, whose frame had been powerful and muscular in its time—who had evidently been a giant of strength in his youth. He was not a pleasant object, standing there with his beard of a fortnight’s growth, his tangled grey hair straggling over his forehead, from under a torn fur cap—his great hands, with their cords of veins swollen upon them, clutching the door-post.

“I’ve seed you at mischief. And I never forget faces, young gents—I never forget ‘em, ‘pon my soul !”

“Good-night.”

“Ricksworth, will you come on ?” cried his wife, passionately ; and whilst he was considering her suggestion, a well-aimed shot with a copy of Isaac Watts caught the door, and sent it flying towards the fingers of the intruder, who quickly withdrew them, and suffered the door to bang to with only a few oaths at the proffered indignity.

Thirsk laughed at this abrupt conclusion to the interview, but made no comment concerning it. On the contrary, took up the Visitors’ Book, and began to skim its contents. I was in no mood to break the silence, and having finished my cigar, felt, after my long journey, quite prepared for my room.

After a few moments’ consideration, I rose and rang the bell, to apprise the waitress of my intentions, and Thirsk watched me over the leaves of the volume in his hands.

“Off ?” he said, at last.

“Yes—I am tired.”

“Well, good-night to you. Don’t be alarmed at my rest-

less spirit wandering up stairs at a late hour. ‘Macbeth doth murder sleep,’ you know.”

“ You don’t proceed to your room yet ? ”

“ No. I have a letter or two to write. Oh ! the host of friends left behind who are waiting anxiously to hear of my safe arrival ! Mary, my dear,” to the young lady who appeared at this juncture, “ you may retire to your slumbers in peace—I shall require no more food or drink to-night. Leave me my chamber candlestick, and let me know the number of my room.”

“ My mother would prefer all the lights out below, Sir—you can write in your room, of course.”

“ Thank you,” said he ; “ may I borrow the Visitors’ Book till the morning—if I have time I will write you my best recommendation—and the inkstand, and a volume of dear old eloquent Isaac here ? Thank you, my dear, thank you.”

With the articles he had enumerated gathered together in his arms, he gave me a half-comical, half-sinister glance, and prepared to shuffle in his slippers up the stairs. At the door of my room he stretched out his hand impetuously towards me, and bade me good-night, thus very clumsily letting the inkstand topple over on to the strip of landing carpet.

“ Confound it, that was foolish !—on these beautiful druggets, too. Well, good-night, Neider ; the blessing of an honest man keep your slumbers hallowed from danger—and fleas ! Can I have another inkstand, my dear—or is there enough ink left in this unfortunate fallen one ? ”

“ It’s broken, Sir—and you know it ! ” said the girl, indignantly.

“ No matter, no matter—I have one in my carpet-bag. Good-night, Mr. Neider. Mary, my dear, good-night to you.”

He passed into the adjoining room and locked the door, and I could but imitate his example, leaving the landlady’s daughter scrubbing at the stair-carpet. The walls were thin between me and my future companion, and I could hear him laughing heartily in his own room—and a very hollow unpleasant laugh it sounded at that hour of the night.

Long after I was in my bed, I could hear him walking about his room like one possessed with the curse of unrest; and when I had been asleep some hours at least, he woke me again by a snatch of a song that seemed humming close to my ears.

I rapped at the wall with my knuckles, and he responded:—

“Hollo there!—aren’t you well?”

“Yes, and trying to sleep, if you’ll allow me.”

“All right, my good fellow! I say?”

“What is it?” I cried, angrily.

“It’s turned out a lovely night—or morning. It’s worth rising and looking at the moon. There’s the eaves of Follingay farm white as silver amongst the poplars.”

“Ah!” was my phlegmatic response; “good-night, and don’t make more row than you can help.”

“Good-night—God bless you!”

And that was all I heard of this young gentleman for one night—and more than I had wished to hear.



## CHAPTER II.

LATE as Mr. Thirsk had retired to rest, he was up and out before me the next morning. Mr. Thirsk would be back again in half an hour, I was informed; and as that seemed a hint to wait breakfast, I put on my hat and went out of the front door of the “Haycock Inn.”

It was a fine, bright morning. Last night’s rain appeared to have cleared up matters, and brought the genial summer back; Welsdon in the Woods lay a fair landscape before me in the sunshine.

A peaceful retreat from the world’s bustle, I thought it, as I strolled leisurely up the rising ground to the left of the inn; where a man, tired of the feverish strife amidst crowds,

might pitch his tent and take comfort from inaction. No sweep of mountain and dale, or rush of waterfall, as in the dear old Cumberland, where my mother waited my return, but just sufficient of rising ground to vary the landscape here and there ; a sprinkling of thatched cottages, a winding road, a rippling brook, a picturesque wooden bridge for lazy anglers, a glorious background of forest land, shutting all in—deep, dark, and sombre—part of the wooded estate of Sir Richard Freemantle, Baronet.

I enjoyed my walk that morning ; I even extended it beyond its just limits, and reached the “Haycock Inn” five minutes past the half-hour mentioned by my companion of the preceding night. He had not returned, however, and as I did not feel inclined to delay any longer my breakfast, I ordered it forthwith, and took up my position at the window whilst it was being prepared.

On the window-sill I observed the Visitors’ Book which Thirsk had taken to his room the night before. For the want of a better volume, I opened it and endeavoured to while away the few minutes before breakfast by its medley of contents.

And a strange compound of wretched doggerel, and glowing compliments, and weak wit, the book consisted of, wherein the majority of visitors to the “Haycock Inn” had scrawled their sentiments in turn for the last nine years. I naturally turned to the last page for the maxims and opinions of Mr. Thirsk, and was rewarded for my search by finding a full-length pen-and-ink sketch of the landlady’s daughter, under which was written, in a clear, bold hand, “The Fair Maid of the ‘Haycock.’” Not that he had drawn the young lady with any great degree of personal charms, but, on the contrary, had taken no small pains to caricature her, and had somewhat cleverly parodied the forbidding frown with which she had favoured him more than once yesterday.

Mr. Thirsk had evidently fallen into thought after the completion of his sketch, and dallied idly with his pen, and scratched a host of names, places and dates on the opposite page. More than once my own name figured there, once in German text in a blaze of dashing flourishes. He appeared to have been striving to recollect all the names that he had

heard yesterday, for there was a little row of them numbered in this order :—

1. *Matthew Genny.*
2. *Robin Genny.*
3. *Peter Ricksworth.*
4. *Mercy Ricksworth.*
5. *Alfred Neider*
6. *Nicholas Thirsk.*

There had been a seventh name, which had been carefully scratched out with a penknife.

I had turned to the earlier pages of the Visitors' Book, when two figures stopped by the window and shook hands. Looking up, I recognised Thirsk and a hairy-faced, round-shouldered young man in a cut-away Tweed coat. Both young men's habiliments looked far from new in the bright sunshine ; seedy and racketey men-about-town they both seemed just then.

“ You won't come in, then ? ” I heard Thirsk say.

“ No, Nick, my boy, not now.”

“ Well, we shall meet again.”

“ All right.”

“ All right, Robin Adair, be it.”

The men parted, and Thirsk came into the house.

“ Good-morning to you, Alfred Neider, of the Vale of St. John,” said he, shaking hands. “ I have been paying a morning visit to my good friends in the neighbourhood.”

“ I thought that you were a stranger here ? ”

“ Exactly, but my friends seem to scent me out in a remarkable manner. Here's Robin Genny, a regular old London bird, hopping about here and snuffing the country air. Not that he has come after me, but after his sweetheart. You know Robin Genny, I suppose ? ”

“ I really have not the pleasure.”

“ Genny the author, newspaper man, theatrical critic, essayist, and special reporter. A man who has seen life, and earned lots of money in his time. As clever a fellow as ever worked his brains dry, without making a name beyond his own circle. One of the best of fellows, with an unpleasant habit of borrowing half-crowns.”

“ Is he any relation to our farmer ? ”

“Nephew. He was the gentleman who recommended me to try high-farming, and thought I should be sure to succeed therein. Have you rung for breakfast?”

“Yes.”

“And admired my sketch of the ‘Maid of the Inn?’”

“You are rather severe on that damsel.”

“Well, I forgive her her trespasses against me; I am an easy fellow, and bear no malice. I believe that I said so last night, Neider?”

“Something to that effect.”

When the breakfast was brought in, and Thirsk had allowed the landlady’s daughter to retire without comment, he said:—

“This is the beginning of a new life for you and me. How will it end?”

“Fortunately, I hope.”

“‘Life’s a mystery,’ says the philosopher. ‘Life’s a merry-go-round,’ says the wise man, who cares not for the morrow. I’m of the wise order.”

“Well?”

“I’ll give no thought to the morrow—I’ll live and wax fat, and let schemers go by me. And yet I ought to be a miserable man.”

“Why?”

“There’s no future before me! You can sit down content with the knowledge that money awaits you: I’m a poor beggar, whose chances have gone! My father disowned me, and said that I should never be worth a shilling. Isn’t that taunt sufficient to make a man play a desperate game?”

“I don’t exactly understand.”

“You’re a dull fellow, there’s German blood in you.”

And he set to work at his breakfast in somewhat of a petulant manner. His early rising had not given him an appetite, however, for after a time he pushed his plate away, and contented himself with observing me.

“You’re a fair trencherman,” he remarked.

“Very fair, generally.”

“Nothing on your mind to rob you of an appetite?”

“Oh! no.”

"Never unsettled—feeling a desire to be 'everything by turns, and nothing long'—troubled with the angels?"

"Eh?"

"Troubled with the angels—am I not explicit enough?"

"Good or bad angels?"

"Well, the odds in favour of the latter, all whispering in your ear, and tugging at the thing called a heart, and skirmishing incessantly with the weaker cherubs that once sat up aloft, but are now going down, down, down! What a different man I might have been, if ——"

I looked up as he paused.

"——If I hadn't been a fool; or if I had been an arrant knave, and a hypocrite. I wonder how much longer you intend to stay in this cursed old inn?"

"I am ready."

I had scarcely spoken when a little wiry old man on a wiry nag came trotting up to the front door.

"Be there any gentlemen here?" he asked.

"Yes—two."

"For the farm?"

"I believe so."

"I'll speak to 'em, if you please."

"Hollo!—what is it?"

And Nicholas Thirsk had thrown up the window, and was leaning out.

The man brought his nag level with him.

"Be you the young gentlemen expected last night, Sir?"

"Yes, we be," said Thirsk.

"Measter thought as something moight be wrong like."

"What's your name?" asked Thirsk, abruptly.

"Ipps."

"Thirsty morning, isn't it?"

"Ay, ay."

And Ipps grinned, and two little grey eyes in his head twinkled shrewdly.

"Tell them to score up a pint of ale to my account, old soldier."

"Thank'ee, Sir. I was told to ask if there be any luggage

to fetch from the station, as the cart's going up this arternoon."

"There's a fishing-rod and a four-post bedstead of mine," said Thirsk.

"I can harness the nag to the bedstead, Sir," was Ipps's quick answer.

"Who cut your hair?" inquired Thirsk.

"I has it done when the chaff-cutter's at work, Sir."

"You're a knowing blade for the country, old man," said Thirsk. "Get your ale, and then ask the landlady for a carpet-bag of mine."

"Yes, Sir."

"And tell Mr. Genny there is some luggage of mine at the station," I cried.

"Happy fellow!" said Thirsk, turning round with a sneer.

Mr. Ipps rode back to the front entrance, and was standing there by the side of his nag when Thirsk and I were ready for departure.

"Is this all, Sir?" asked Ipps, weighing a small carpet-bag of Thirsk's in his hand.

"Yes. Isn't it heavy enough for you?"

"Oh, yes, if it be for you, Sir."

Thirsk looked at the man, but his face wore a stolid expression, as he poised the carpet-bag in his hand.

"Tell Mr. Genny we have started. Tell him we are two of the most promising farm pupils he has ever had at Follingay, Ipps."

"All right, Sir."

Ipps was an old man, but he vaulted into the saddle with the agility of a young one.

"You're a lively specimen," said Thirsk; "how old are you?"

"Eighty-three, Sir."

"Get out!"

"Eighty-three, come Follingay fair next, Sir. I doan't ask you to believe it, if you bean't inclined."

"Well, I won't."

"Thank'ee, Sir! Good-day."

And Ipps, looking a trifle nettled at Thirsk's rejoinder, gave a cut over the ears to his nag, and rode away at a smart pace.

Having defrayed our respective bills at the "Haycock Inn," Thirsk and I set out to walk the three-quarters of a mile that lay between the village of Welsdon and the Follingay farm.

A pleasant walk along the winding road that summer morning with Nicholas Thirsk for company. And certainly a man who improved upon acquaintance, despite its being a matter of doubt how much of earnestness mixed itself with his light jesting vein. A man who might have been a different being under different circumstances, and whose family troubles seemed to have jarred upon him, and affected the natural good in his character. He was in a versatile mood that morning; he darted from subject to subject, and displayed no small acuteness, and even a certain amount of varied, if desultory, reading.

Until the present time, I had been somewhat of a student myself, caring more for books and book study than for those pursuits to which my father had wished to direct my attention, and the little quotations that so easily escaped him I more than once recognised; he would have won upon me far more speedily if he had not always mingled with his discourse the acrid vein, which rendered him sceptical of all good intentions, and doubtful of all earnestness in human nature. If he had said "Life's a mockery and full of schemers" at the breakfast table, it might have more properly expressed the current of his own dark thoughts.

"I suppose all this wood on our right is the Freemantle estate," said Thirsk; "rare shooting amongst these preserves, I would wager a fair crown."

"The owner is one of the lucky ones of the world, Thirsk."

"I have heard that he is one of the most miserable devils under the sun," was the reply.

"Well, that is his own fault."

"Perhaps so."

We had neared the farm by that time, and the rest of the way to the great gates was spent in silence between us.

It was a large farm, wherein much life was stirring. The bustle of many hands was evident in the farm-yard on which we looked as we descended the hill.

I had pictured a different farm to the one confronting us—an old thatched roof and a woodbine porch, in lieu of the

great red-brick building that was not above five or six years old. There was a pile of barns, also red-brick, with slate roofs, to the right of the house, and we could hear the thump, thump of a steam engine as we advanced. Matthew Genny, farmer, was evidently a man well-to-do in the world.

Matthew Genny, aforesaid, accompanied by a fresh-coloured, good-looking young man, and a gaunt sheep dog, came out of the gates to meet us.

“The farmer himself,” I remarked.

“Yes, there’s no doubt of that. The air of Welsdon must be good for the intellect, I take it. This is another sharp customer advancing, or I’m no judge of my species.”

And Matthew Genny looked a “sharp customer,” as Thirsk termed it. He was a man below the middle height, and far from portly. If not as old, certainly looking as tough and wiry in frame as the Mr. Ipps whom he had sent to the “Haycock Inn.” A grey-haired, pale-faced man, with a hooked nose that matched the bone handle of the riding whip he carried, and with a pair of thin lips that betokened a man not inclined to let many secrets escape them — lips that could count money with a strange inward drawing of the breath, as if cash in hand were nearest his heart ; and long bony fingers, that would not have looked out of place dallying with a heap of sovereigns—regular miser’s fingers. This was my first impression, which was a deceptive one, I may say here. A careful and a calculating man, but no miser, was Matthew Genny of Follingay farm.

He smiled as we advanced, and, tucking his whip under his arm, offered a hand to each of us.

“Welcome to this part of the country, gentlemen. We shall make good farmers of ye, I hope.”

“I hope so,” was my answer, which Thirsk immediately echoed.

“Ye maun’t disgrace an honest old man’s teaching, either of ye. We turn out a good breed of farmers from Welsdon in the Woods. This young gentleman here be my last specimen—and a credit.”

“Thank you, Mr. Genny,” said the young man at his side, with a pleasant laugh.

“Ye’ll be better acquainted, the three of ye, presently—I

doan't understand much about new-fangled styles of introduction—his name's Grey."

It was intended for an introduction, and we bowed, and looked a little foolishly at each other.

"And one or the other of these is Neider," said Mr. Genny, "and the one left is Thirsk—two outlandish names, the couple of 'em," he added, bluntly.

"Ah!" said Thirsk, "and two outlandish fellows. Look after us."

"Ay! you'll want it, may be."

"Lucky you haven't a pretty daughter for us to make love to, farmer," said Thirsk.

"Ay! ay! but there's a niece, and she," he added, with a sepulchral kind of chuckle, "can take care of herself, I'm inclined to think. This way, gentlemen."

So met on the hill-side four men, whose lives were destined to cross and recross each other, influencing each other's strangely, and casting many shadows in their pilgrimage, and working much of mystery.

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### CHAPTER III.

#### FOLLINGAY FARM.

MATTHEW GENNY was not of the old-fashioned order of farmers. He was a man quick to turn a penny to his own advantage, and seize any opportunity which presented to bring pennies to his purse. No farmer within twenty miles of Welsdon calculated so well the best time for hay-making and harvesting, and dodged so effectually the wet weather, which might have affected his crops. There was not a better cattle-breeder in the country, and at Follingay horse-fair he was more than a match for the dealers.

He was a lover of improvements, and never sneered at those new-fashioned ways of sowing and reaping to which his forefathers had been strangers. What suited his fore-

fathers would not suit him in the year 1856—he wanted “patents,” and “prize drills and ploughs,” and steam power; and there were some in Follingay to whisper that he was a little too speculative, and, good farmer as he was, did not prepare sufficiently for that rainy day that comes to each of us in turn.

Matthew Genny was a man of business though—every action bespoke business.

“This is my little counting-house, gentlemen,” he said, leading the way into an inner sanctum, across the threshold of which Mr. Grey did not follow us. “Here we may as well square up money matters, previously to arranging those little bits of things that require settling before we can understand each other. Short reckonings to begin with, eh, Sirs?”

“Here is a cheque from my mother, on the Carlisle Bank, for one hundred guineas,” said I. “I presume you allude to the premium agreed upon between Mrs. Neider and yourself.”

“Roight, my lad,” said he, taking the cheque from me and placing it in his pocket-book; “not that I be in so great a hurry for the money as all that—but square’s square.”

Nicholas Thirsk, with a lip that curled a little, despite him, opened his pocket-book and drew therefrom four ten-pound notes.

“I may as well follow suit, Mr. Genny,” said he. “Forty pounds was the very lowest sum, I believe, for four months?”

“The very lowest.”

“I hope you understand that I do not come as a farm-pupil. That I have no intention of working as a farm-servant.”

Mr. Genny looked from the notes towards the speaker, then back to the notes again.

“I’m thinking ye had better take your money back, Mr. Thirsk. For, of course, ye are the Mr. Thirsk with whom I have been lately having a bit of a write?”

“I am *the* Mr. Thirsk.”

“I’ve a fancy that ye are cooming here with foine gentleman notions—that ye want to know all about farming,

without putting yeerself to the trouble of working hard for your knowledge. That woan't answer."

"I intend to study the matter, but you see, Mr. Genny, I never expect to be a farmer."

"Oh!"

"I may obtain a farm-bailiff's place some day, perhaps, but never a farm. That is," he added, "my idea at present. Of course the world will roll round, and I shall be uppermost or undermost, according to my luck."

"Ay," said Genny, dubiously regarding him.

"But any advice you have to give me I shall be happy to entertain. I'm here to get my forty pounds' worth for my money."

"And it's yeer own fault if ye doan't get it," said he, stowing away Thirsk's notes, an operation which their late owner regarded silently, and even a little sorrowfully; "and my first advice be, obey orders. I've your money, and I should loike to do my duty by ye. I've turned out mony a good farmer from this place, and I've seen mony a milksop leave no wiser than he coom. If you don't work with a wull, take to something else."

He drew himself nearer the table, and scrawled two hasty receipts for the money we had given him. Thirsk, standing at the back of him, shrugged his shoulders, and made a wry face at me, the meaning of which I could only comprehend to be his contempt for Mr. Genny's remarks, so I stared very stolidly at him, by way of reply. I had come to pursue farming honestly, and swerve not at the practical part; for what reason Nicholas Thirsk had arrived seemed a matter of doubt.

"There's the receipts," said he; "and now, gentlemen, put away the foine notions with your foine boots. If ye want to be grand, this bean't the home for it. Farmers be always homely people; we're of the homeliest, and, of course, ye fall into our ways, not we into your'n. We breakfast, dine, and tea early—we've our own cured hams, and our own home-brewed—we're generally in bed by nine o'clock in summer toime, and eight in winter. Daybreak always sees us up. That's all I need say at present."

"I don't think we shall infringe much on your rules."

"All the better, gentlemen. Now, if ye'll coom with me

into the other room ye shall make the acquaintance of my niece ; and, by the way, Mr. Thirsk——”

“ Sir,” responded that gentleman.

“ In our first bit of scribble together, when ye opened your views to me aboot this place, ye mentioned a friend’s name.”

“ Robin Genny.”

“ Ay—a writing man. Writes a moightly lot of rubbish, I fancy ; but then I’m a coontyman, who doan’t know people’s taste in town. May I ask if ye have seen that gentleman ? ”

“ Yes—this morning.”

“ Eh, lad ? ” said Genny, surprised.

Thirsk repeated his assertion.

“ Darmed if I didn’t think he told me he was off to London last noight. A good fellow in his way, but I doan’t understand his way quite so well as Harriet. And so he’s still in Welsdon ? ”

“ Yes ; staying at the country house of one Peter Ricksworth, for an hour or two.”

“ Do ye know Ricksworth ? ” asked Genny, sharply.

“ I had the pleasure of seeing that gentleman this morning.”

“ Perhaps the less you see of him the better.”

“ Possibly.”

“ It’s hard to say that of one’s own brother-in-law ; but so it be, and all the foine speeches won’t soften the matter. This way.”

He led the way into a spacious room, well carpeted and furnished, having some sporting prints, and a portrait of Matthew Genny, that was not a bit like him, on the wall. At the broad window at the extremity of the room, Mr. Grey stood talking to the farmer’s niece, evidently giving some little sketch of Thirsk and me, for the amusement of the lady, whose face wore a quiet, almost a grave smile, as she listened.

“ Harriet, my dear, these are the two young men I have been talking aboot lately—Mr. Thirsk and Mr. Neider.”

Harriet Genny bowed in a very lady-like manner for a farmer’s niece, and just glanced at us for a moment. Mr. Thirsk and I regarded her with more interest.

A tall girl of one or two-and-twenty, with a grave, almost an anxious face. Neither a blonde nor a brunette, nor of any particular class of beauty—her hair of a rich brown, and her eyes of a deep hazel, that had some of the brightness and shrewdness of her uncle's in them. For one living in the country her face might have been less pale, the cheek-bones a shade less prominent. And yet it was altogether a striking face. Not a pretty face, with features far from regular, but still the face of an earnest woman, looking at life far from frivolously, and knowing her duties in it, and following her way therein steadily and persistently. Her duties might run counter to her inclinations very often, but she looked a woman who never let the matter master her.

"I think we'll have a mug of Follingay ale, by way of a beginning, Harriet."

"Shall Jane——"

"What! the old Follingay? No, no, that woan't do. Only ye or I, lass, maun touch that brew."

At this hint Harriet departed to draw the beer herself, and Thirsk said, carelessly—

"Your daughter, did you say?"

"Noa, I haven't been blessed with one, Mr. Thirsk. She's only my niece—a good girl—the very best of girls. She and I doan't have many cross words together, though I be a little hot at toimes."

"Quite a comfort to you in your old age."

"I'm not so very old, Mr. Thirsk," replied Mr. Genny, a little sharply.

"Well—no."

And Mr. Thirsk seemed to take a critical examination of the farmer, as though anxious to divest himself of his first impression concerning him.

Harriet returned with a tray containing four glasses and a large mug of the ale of which Matthew Genny was proud, and Matthew Genny poured the frothing liquid into the glasses, which he held one by one to the light before passing to us.

"Rare good ale this be, gentlemen, though I say it, who brewed it four years ago, coom next harvest. Ale which I'm a little proud of, and only bring out on grand occasions like the present."

"What occasion would you call this now?" asked Thirsk, curiously

"Well, it's an increase of my family by two. It's two new sons at my side if ye serve me fairly, as I expect to be served. Here's to our good understanding, and may I make first-rate farmers of ye both."

"Thank you," I answered.

Thirsk did not respond, but drank his ale at a draught, and put the glass down without comment. Genny looked from him to me, as if expecting a few encomiums on his ale, and I hastened to add that it was fine old ale, which I could honestly aver without exaggeration.

"Take another soop of it," he cried heartily; "it won't hurt ye. There's only the real malt and hop in it. None of the stuff ye get in London, moind ye."

He filled my glass and held it to the light again, and looked at it in a fatherly manner. Thirsk's silence regarding its merits made him a little uneasy; he had been accustomed to much praise concerning it, and he was somewhat tenacious on the point.

"Shall I fill your glass, Sir?" he asked.

"Thank you—thank you."

"Ye doan't like it, mayhap?"

"Oh, I've tasted worse ale," said Thirsk, carelessly.

"Ay, I'll swear ye have!" was the sharp if conceited answer.

"And here's another toast," said I: "Health and happiness to all in Follingay farm."

"Thank'ee, Sir, thank'ee. A generous toast! By dad, we shall get on!" and Genny tossed off his second glass with us, and then looked round at his niece—"Did ye hear that now, Harriet?"

"Yes."

"That's a good sweeping toast, that doan't leave even the cat out—what do ye say, Mr. Thirsk?"

He appeared to be rather puzzled by Mr. Thirsk's manner, and his keen grey eyes turned again to his new pupil.

"A toast we can heartily drink, however much we may be assured of its falsity. I like yours the best, Mr. Genny, and so here's success to the object with which we came hither."

“I didn’t say that.”

“You implied the same, in different words.”

“Ay,” said Genny, repeating that hesitative affirmative which he generally adopted, when doubtful as to the answer that seemed necessary.

Harriet Genny stood by the window looking towards the speakers, and evidently interested in us. There was a singularity in Thirsk’s manner which had struck her as well as her uncle, and she stood quietly regarding him from her post of observation. Thirsk looked towards her.

“Will not Miss Genny wish us success in a glass of her uncle’s favourite ale?”

“Not at present, Sir.”

The reply was brief, even a little abrupt, and did not court further questioning. But Mr. Thirsk was in an aggravating mood, and might have pressed the request, had not Genny curtailed matters by saying:—

“Well, gentlemen, perhaps before dinner ye’d like to go over part of the farm?”

“I’m tired,” said Thirsk; “I hope this evening or to-morrow will do for me. I sat up late last night trying to finish a few matters that required immediate attention—I have an hour’s work still on hand.”

“Well, doan’t neglect work, Sir, or ye’ll never roise in the world. Perhaps ye are *not* too busy, Mr. Neider?”

“I should like to see the farm.”

“This way then, Sir. We’ve our work coot out before dinner”

Mr. Genny led the way out of the farm-house, and across the spacious farm-yard to the fields lying beyond—corn fields, clover fields, and meadow land, stretching far away across the country. Mr. Genny gave a comprehensive sweep with his whip.

“It be all there, Sir. That’s the field of work for the next year—a large book to standy, and to make anything oot of.”

“I suppose so.”

“Noine hundred and odd acres, and I’m the only man yet that’s ever made a penny by ‘em.”

“How’s that?” I asked, as we walked on.

“The land’s dear, and a quarter of it runs beside that plantation yonder.”

“I see.”

“And the darmed game, which to touch is more than my place is worth, plays a moighty lot of damage with the corn, and eats the tops off the young wheat, and picks out the seeds, and does everything mischievous. What the deevil Sir Richard keeps the game for, be more than I can understand, or ever shall. He’s a man that doan’t take naturally to company.”

“An old man, perhaps?”

“Forty, or so, with a face loike a death’s-head. But I’ve nothing to complain of, take him altogether.”

Short as were the legs of Matthew Genny, I found a difficulty in keeping up with him—his little steps went so quickly over the ground. In less than a mile’s wandering with Matthew Genny, I saw enough to convince me of the practical mind of my future tutor. Everything around betokened a man who knew how to turn his land to its best use; whose knowledge of the art of sowing and reaping was something so deep and concentrated as to leave me in despair of ever following in his steps. After all he was not of a reticent nature; on the contrary, seemed anxious to initiate me into too many mysteries at once, thus confusing me with his information. He was a man, too, who expected a fair amount of work from his servants, and the extra diligence evinced by the men whom he suddenly encountered told of a taskmaster whose frowns were to be feared.

“Ye have a farm in Coomberland, Mr. Neider?” he said after a time.

“Yes—a very small one.”

“Small farms are not the worst farms,” he remarked; “and if a man sets his heart on making his land pay, he wull do it. We shall make a good farmer of *ye*.”

“Do you think so?”

“Well, there’s a cut aboot *ye* that means work. Now, that other young fellow—but perhaps he’s a friend of yours?”

“I met him for the first time last night at the ‘Haycock Inn.’”

“Do *ye* think, now, that he’ll take to farming?—does he speak much aboot it?”

“Very little.”

Mr. Genny nibbled at the horn hook to his whip.

“ He be an odd customer, rather. He’s coom and flung away forty poonds as clean as ever I saw it doon in my life. He cares as much for farming as a cat, I’d bet a shilling, now. Be he anything of a scribbler, do ye know ? ”

“ An author, do you mean ? ”

“ Ay.”

That was a peculiar “ Ay ” of Matthew Genny’s, and peculiarly pronounced, like a long “ I.” It implied so much—it was a reflective kind of affirmative, negative, anything. It always appeared to be waiting for something to escape you, and on which a pounce could be made. Certainly he was a keen old gentleman, in more matters than farming.

“ I don’t know—I don’t think so.”

“ His father’s a gentleman, Robin tells me.”

“ Robin ? ”

“ Ay.”

There was a pause, then he added—

“ Robin Genny—my nephew, whom I spoke of a short while ago. One of the scribblers, too, and a rare lazy loon, with aboot as much knowledge of the world as yon bramble-bush, for all his Loondon life and society. A poor muck of a fellow !—the Lord help him ! So I thought, maybe, as they were acquaintances—birds of a feather loike. But this Mr. Thirsk is a darmed deal deeper than Robin, or I’m clean Halifaxed—he’s too deep for me at present,” he added, a little conceitedly.

I did not reply. I was far from inclined to make Mr. Nicholas Thirsk the subject of conversation ; it seemed hardly fair to him, who might be one of the best of fellows, for what I knew to the contrary. At present he appeared to me a man a little unsettled in mind ; when we were all better friends, I hinted, it was likely that we should all understand each other better.

“ I’m not curious,” said Genny, “ and ye’re right aboot knowing each other better. Only, ye see,” as if by way of apology for his persistence, “ he cooms a stranger into my house, and it’s fair I should know as much aboot him as I can afford to get hold of. He’s one of those dark-faced chaps ye don’t read all at once, loike——”

“ Like my very plain countenance,” I added, laughing.

“Ay,” he answered, and laughed too.

We found the subject of conversation in the farm-yard on our return. He had fraternised with the yard-dog, the bad-tempered canine brute of which we had been warned last night at the “Haycock Inn ;” he was patting it very affectionately as we entered the yard.

“Take care there, Mr. Thirsk. He doan’t take kindly to strangers.”

“Oh ! he has taken to me ! I knew he would, by the look of him.”

And the dog was certainly inclined to be hail-fellow-well-met with Nicholas Thirsk, and leaped, and rattled his chain, and rubbed his great head against the legs of his new-formed acquaintance.

Mr. Grey, standing at the side door leading into the farmhouse, seemed to be surveying the scene with no little curiosity.

“Why, William,” the farmer called out, “Mr. Thirsk shows more courage in a day than ye have in a year.”

“I’m not fond of dogs,” he answered, with a frank laugh ; “and particularly that dog.”

“My father had a hundred,” cried Thirsk, “and only one of them ever showed its teeth at me.”

“And what did ye do with him ?” asked Genny.

“Oh ! I shot him !” was the careless reply.

“Ay,” remarked Matthew Genny, and the hooked handle of his whip went towards his thin lips again.

“It’s the best way to serve anything that proves false,” remarked Thirsk.

“I would prefer giving the animal a wide range, to sending it out of the world,” said Grey.

“Affording it a chance to bite others—that’s Christianity.”

We dined at one o’clock in the large dining-room, wherein we had tasted the Follingay ale ; Harriet Genny said a long grace, and Thirsk sat by the side of me, and kept his great dark eyes fixed attentively on her face. When she had finished, he burst forth with,

“I have never heard grace so well delivered in my life !”

Harriet Genny made no answer ; did not even bend her head by way of return to the compliment.

“I am not attempting flattery, Miss Genny.”

"I am pleased to hear it, Sir," was the short answer.

"Perhaps Miss Genny objects to flattery?"

"Certainly."

"Well, I've heard many a lady make that assertion before," said Thirsk, drily.

"By dad, yes!" cried Genny, with a chuckle, as he commenced carving a huge round of beef; "it's a habit of theirs."

"Not that I doubt Miss Genny's word for an instant—I hope she will believe that."

Miss Genny was not to be drawn into conversation. The slightest inclination of the head might be taken as a response or not, according to the observer's fancy.

"I did not intend flattery, I repeat," continued Thirsk, who was vexatiously pressing on this point; "but Miss Genny's grace offered so great a contrast to the many graces I have heard in my time—slipshod graces, with as much reverence in them as in this knife. And I am a fair critic in this matter—for I was piously brought up!"

The peculiar intonation with which he concluded, drew all eyes towards him again, but Thirsk was politely assisting with the potatoes, and whether he spoke in derision, or in sober earnest, there was no guessing from his face. I, who had been a witness to his peculiar humours yesternight, had my own opinion on the matter.

The early dinner was quietly proceeded with—Mr. Genny took the lead in the couversation, and discussed farming matters, to which none of us paid any particular attention, and leaned across the table, directing the whole force of his conversation to me, which was somewhat embarrassing. Thirsk ate but little dinner, and seemed annoyed at Mr. Genny pressing him with reasons for his want of appetite; the farmer's niece was taciturn, and even, I fancied at times, a little vexed.

The impression began to deepen on me that Harriet Genny was a short-tempered damsel, with the somewhat desirable accomplishment of keeping her tempers to herself, and not allowing them to intrude upon general society. It was hardly sulkiness, however, for she answered readily all questions put to her, and only refrained from starting a general topic. Possibly I had misjudged her, I thought at

a later hour, when my trunks had not arrived, and I had begged the favour of writing materials for a short while.

Mr. Thirsk had suddenly wished to see a little of the farm, and gone out with Mr. Genny and Grey, and I was left alone that summer evening with the farmer's niece.

"My travelling-desk is still at the railway station, Miss Genny—and I am anxious to let my mother know that I have reached Follingay farm."

"Your mother will be naturally anxious to hear from you," she said.

"Yes; and I promised on the first night of my arrival to write a few lines."

"Do you always keep your promises, Mr. Neider?" she asked.

It was a strange question, and I looked up from the writing materials which she had placed before me. She was standing on the other side of the table, arranging the lamp to her satisfaction, and I met her eyes directed full towards me.

"When it is possible."

"I don't understand you."

"There are some promises that are impossible to keep, I fancy."

"Why are they made, then?"

"Oh! a moment of impulse may form them sometimes."

"Are you impulsive?"

"Not very, I think."

She seemed anxious to put another question, but altered her mind, and went from the room, leaving me to write my long-promised letter to my mother. For I had not come direct from Cumberland, but had been to London, to see my mother's solicitor, and my father's executors, and to state my intentions of following the farming, in fulfilment of that father's last wishes.

My mother loved long letters from her son; and I was her only son, who held the first place in her heart. Ever to me had she been the best and most indulgent of mothers; and I did not begrudge the time bestowed upon the long epistle which I began to write. I had not much to tell her; I had not met with a great deal of adventure; I could not say how I liked the new faces which had gathered round me;

whether I should ever settle down at Follingay farm, and say this is my home ! Still I was resolved to make the best of it, and I knew it would please her to hear that I had turned with a will to the farming. A little pleased that dear mother of mine, and I did not cast a shadow amidst the spare news I had to communicate. There was no occasion for me to dilate on the old thoughts and old wishes that I had sunk for ever—on ambitious dreams that I had had, and which were gone,—on the different life I had sketched out for myself *once*. We all have such dreams, and sooner or later they elude us; if mine parted from me somewhat suddenly, still mine was a strength that could bear the disruption. I had resolved to become a farmer, and I let the old vague hopes go down the stream, and turned my back upon them. It was the wish of one sleeping in the church-yard, amidst the Cumberland fells, and it exacted from me nothing more harsh and unreasonable than that of following in his steps. Whither my own might have led, God knows —there was a mother to provide for, and *he* thought for the best. Perhaps I acted for the best also—who can tell ?

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## CHAPTER IV

MERCY RICKSWORTH.

PULLING one's hair behind is not a courteous mode of attracting one's attention. It suggested itself to me that it was somewhat of a liberty, and a very unaccountable liberty, too, whoever might be the offender.

I was conscious of changing colour very much, or rather of assuming a bright brickdust hue, before I mustered sufficient courage to confront my tormentor. I was conscious, also, of running over the names of the parties who could feel themselves, on so early an acquaintance, warranted in taking the liberty. Mr. Grey or Mr. Genny was not likely to adopt this course; Thirsk, who I suspected might be seized with a freak of the kind, was absent with the others—and, good Heavens!—if it were Miss Genny!—how greatly I had been mistaken in that matter-of-fact damsel !

I turned round, and was surprised to find a stranger at the back of my chair.

A pretty stranger, too, of not more than seventeen years of age—a dark-haired, dark-eyed, rosy-cheeked English girl. Brightly but still neatly dressed ; she seemed to lighten up the gloomy parlour in which I had been so intently occupied.

“ Oh ! my good gracious !—I beg your pardon, Sir—I thought it was Mr. Grey ! ”

She did not betray quite so much confusion as many young ladies might have done under the circumstances—on the contrary, there was, amidst her blushes, a humorous enjoyment of her mistake and my intense surprise.

“ N-no, Miss—it’s not Mr. Grey. I believe that gentleman is somewhere about the farm with Mr. Genny.”

“ I don’t want him—thank you. I have just run in to see my cousin Harriet.”

“ She is in the next room, I believe, Miss.”

“ No—she is not,” was the flat contradiction of Miss Genny, who entered at this moment ; “ well, Mercy,” addressing her cousin, “ what has brought you, so late, from Welsdon Hall ? ”

“ Merely a wish to see if you were still living, Harriet. It’s so long a time since I have heard a word concerning you.”

“ It’s a dark night.”

“ But no one’s going to eat me up in the darkness, dear, and it’s only three quarters of a mile to the Hall.”

“ Have you been home ? ”

“ Oh !—no,” was the emphatic response ; “ what is there in home to send me dancing all the way to the village ? ”

“ A mother and father,” was the dry rejoinder.

“ Yes, that’s true—but I saw them yesterday, Harriet—and Cousin Robin, too,” with a sly look into Harriet’s face, which betrayed nothing.

“ Sit down, Mercy—your uncle will be back in a minute or two. If he’s cross at you keeping late hours, you must not be very much surprised.”

“ Cross at my showing a little affection to my own flesh and blood, and growing tired of that dark gloomy house ! ” she ejaculated.

“Not that.”

“Perhaps,” she added, a little petulantly, “Uncle Genny is growing too proud to see a poor servant-maid.”

“Not that either. Always unjust, Mercy.”

“Well, let us sit down and have a little chat, Harriet. I’ve so much to tell you. Of the company we have had to-day to look over those tiresome old ruins, with me wandering about with a key like a dreadful gaoler as I am —of Sir Richard Freemantle going to London yesterday, and of Miss Agatha’s return—of a hundred things, Harriet!”

“I am afraid that we shall be disturbing Mr. Neider,” said Miss Genny.

“Not at all—not at all,” I hastened to reply.

“And oh! I made such a dreadful mistake!” whispered Mercy; and she related, in an undertone, her little adventure with myself, winding up with a peal of laughter that rang like music through the room.

Harriet sat by her side near the window, and did not smile much at the incident—on the contrary, I fancied that there was a slight contraction of her high white forehead.

“What’s the matter?” asked Mercy, suddenly becoming grave too.

“Nothing, Mercy. Why do you ask?”

“You’re very grave and cross to-day. But you always are after Robin Genny has been here.”

“How do you know that?” was the sharp inquiry.

“Do you think I am a blind girl?”

“I don’t think you always know what you are talking about,” said Harriet, petulantly.

“Perhaps not,” was the hasty answer.

I could not forbear looking up from my letter at this. The cousins were evidently out of temper, and both inclined to resent the other’s observations. Still it was but a hasty little skirmish of words, that was soon over, and Mercy was in the middle of her news when the farmer and his two pupils re-entered the house.

“What! no supper laid yet!” ejaculated Genny; “and we be half an hoor late, and ought to have been in our beds.”

“The experiment with the dog has taken up the time,” remarked Thirsk;

“Ay,” said the farmer, “and a braw experiment it was. What do you think of Mr. Thirsk unfastening Nero for the night, and not being torn to pieces? I’m thinking ye’ve been to the chemist’s shop, lad, and bought some doctor’s stuff.”

Thirsk laughed, and reiterated that dogs always took to him kindly. Mr. Genny turned to his niece.

“Well, lass, ye’re keeping late hours enough. What has brought ye here, Mercy?”

“I have just answered that question to Harriet,” said Mercy, a little pertly.

“Be it too much trooble to answer again?”

“I have only run over for a gossip with Harriet.”

“At a most unreasonable hoor, my lass—but no matter, How’s all at the old place?”

“Very well.”

“I’m thinking ye’d be better gooing now, Mercy—it’s a quarter to nine, and it’ll be past the hour before ye get home.”

I had finished my letter, closed the envelope, and was leaning back in the chair regarding the scene. It was with no little surprise that I saw Mercy glance very rapidly towards Nicholas Thirsk. It might have been mere girlish curiosity I thought, but still there was something strange in the manner with which Thirsk—to whom I turned—met her glance. He frowned like an ogre, and then walked to the end of the room, and began taking one book after another from a side-table, and glancing carefully at the contents. This position he maintained until Mercy Ricksworth had departed, after previously wishing the farmer, his niece, and Mr. Grey good-night.

I heard Mr. Grey say in a low voice—

“Aren’t you frightened of that long, dark road, Mercy?”

“I’m never frightened at anything, Mr. Grey,” she said with a merry laugh, as she tripped into the farm-yard, and was heard a moment afterwards scolding Néro, for leaping up at her and soiling her blue merino dress.

“Drat that girl! what a toime of night to goo home!” muttered the farmer; and then suddenly remembering two other subjects for vexatious discussion, he said very sharply :—

“ Why bean’t the supper on the table?—and where’s that old Ipps? ”

“ Ipps has gone to the railway station for Mr. Neider’s boxes.”

“ Darm his eyes!—he’s been long enough to fetch the railway station itself! ”

“ Not quite, Measter,” and Ipps walked unceremoniously into the parlour.

“ Well, where have ye been, stupid? ” inquired Genny.

“ At the railway after the boxes, which I aren’t got.”

“ Ay? ”

“ There’s been a spill on the line, and a block up, and the luggage will come to-morrow. The express run into a goods, as usual.”

“ Anyone hurt? ” asked Grey.

“ Only a shake up or two. I saw Sir Richard turn out of the station with his head tied up. Looked loike an old Guyfox, Measter.”

Thirsk dropped the books he had been scanning, and burst into a hearty laugh—so hearty that Genny, who had been inclined to enjoy Ipps’s comparison himself, ceased his own hilarity to regard that of his pupil.

“ You’re a humourist, Ipps,” said Thirsk.

“ No, I ain’t anything of the sort,” returned Ipps, a little indignantly.

“ A dry stick,” turning to Genny, who nodded his head, and said “ Ay! ”

“ So the gentleman maun wait for his traps till to-morrow,” said Ipps ; “ and so good-night, Measters.”

“ I have the advantage of you, Neider,” said Thirsk to me ; “ lucky the man who carries his luggage with him! ”

After supper, Mr. Genny said,

“ There’s a double-bedded room for Mr. Grey and one of ye gentlemen, and a single for the t’other—I suppose ye can settle the matter amongst yeerselves? ”

“ Oh! yes,” Thirsk answered for us.

“ These are infernal early hours,” he muttered, when we three farm pupils were on the landing-place ; “ do they agree with you, Mr. Grey? ”

“ Oh! pretty well.”

"Early hours agree with some folk—others they drive melancholy mad. Is this my room?"

"It's either yours or Mr. Neider's," answered Grey; "whichever way you feel inclined to settle it."

"Well, I am of eccentric habits—write at times till a late hour, and should be inclined to keep my companion awake, by knocking over a few things. But if Mr. Neider insists, why—"

And, like Brutus, he paused for a reply.

I was not inclined to reply too hastily. Mr. Thirsk had in the first instance seemed disposed to claim the room as his right; but I was standing on the order of my dignity, and had always been a little disputatious.

"Let us see the room, Mr. Thirsk."

We entered the room—a neatly-furnished room, with a window looking upon the farm-yard.

"Well, what's it to be?" asked Thirsk, irritably.

"The question is, who has the greater right to this snug hermitage?" I said.

"I don't know that there is any right in the case," said Thirsk; "seniority against rank—which is it to be, Mr. Grey?"

Mr. Thirsk spoke bitterly, but I was becoming used to his sarcasm.

"Oh! I'm a bad umpire in matters of dispute," said Grey, good-humouredly; "when I was at school, we boys settled such differences by the toss up of a halfpenny."

"Exactly—heads and tails, on the old aristocratic principle. 'Lay on, Macduff, and damned be he'—who gets the best bedroom!"

Thirsk spun a half-sovereign in the air, caught it in the palm of his left hand, and covered it with the fingers of his right.

"Now then, first time, Neider. Head or woman?"

"Woman!"

"Right you are!" and Thirsk turned away with affected unconcern, and began swearing in an audible voice over the carpet-bag, which he had caught up in his hand.

"Now, Mr. Grey, friend and comate, you don't object to a man who walks in his sleep?"

"So he don't walk over me, I'm not particular."

"Mr. Neider," looking at me savagely, "I wish you good-night."

"Do you particularly desire this bedroom?" I asked.

"Chiefly for the reason that I'm likely to be a nuisance to any one who sleeps in the same room with me," he answered; "but the die has been cast, and the hazard is against me."

"Well—I resign, Thirsk."

"You mean it?"

"I always mean what I say."

"Then you're a jolly good fellow, and I'll remember you in my will. Thanks!"

And he dropped his carpet-bag, and took off his coat with unusual alacrity.

"What a thing it is to have friends," he said, the mocking vein returning, now his point had been gained; "dear, considerate friends, who study one's little peculiarities. You play Damon to my Pythias, Neider. Good-night—good-night, Mr. Grey."

We echoed his good-nights and crossed the landing into a much larger room, having a bed at each end thereof.

"Have you any choice?" asked Grey, with a wave of his hand towards the beds.

"Not any."

"Then I'll keep to my own, with your good leave. When I become used to anything, I don't like to give it up. Here are the days in the old farm growing beautifully less, and I have just settled down therein too," and he heaved quite a sigh as he concluded.

"When do you leave us, Mr. Grey?"

"Now, don't 'Mr. Grey' a fellow so—it's keeping one too much at arm's length."

"Grey, then."

"Thank'ee. The truth is," he said, in reply to my question, "I don't know when I shall leave you. I was put here out of harm's way, and, till my father finds a farm for me, why, I may as well stop here as anywhere else. I'm one less at home, and there's sixteen there now."

"A large family."

"Yes; lucky the governor made something out of his

silversmith's shop in Gracechurch Street, for we've pulled hard at him, and done our best to keep him down. Have you any brothers and sisters?"

"No, unfortunately."

"Unfortunately, eh? Well, it *is* unfortunate, after all—for quarrel and fight as they may they keep the place lively; and it is astonishing, Neider, how differently one thinks of them all, when six or seven months pass and there's never a glimpse caught of the old faces. I suppose I'm a domestic animal."

"All the better for you."

"Still, I like this part of the world, and fancy I could settle to a farm hereabouts. I took to farming from a boy—possibly because I wasn't a good hand at either figures or classics. The stupid member of a family always becomes a farmer, Neider."

"Indeed!"

"Oh! I beg your pardon, I forgot *you*!" and he laughed very pleasantly at the omission.

"The imputation does not settle on me, Grey; I have not sought farming, but had farming thrust upon me."

"And a very good thing, too."

"Amen to it."

"Now for a fair division of spoil—this half of the room belongs to you, the other to your humble servant. You'll know my half by the picture gallery," pointing to a dozen or two of photographs on the wall.

"Family pictures, Grey?"

"Yes, all the brothers and sisters belonging to me. Do you object to the rattle of dumb-bells in the morning?"

"Oh, no—and I'll borrow yours, if you'll allow me, till mine arrive."

"Certainly—certainly. Anything else?"

"No, thank you."

"Boxing-gloves or single-sticks—if you're fond of that exercise, I don't mind knocking you about a bit."

"Thank you. I may remind you of your kind offer in a day or two."

"I think we shall get on very well," said he, his good-tempered face bright and radiant; "you're a fellow after

my own heart, I'm inclined to think. Are you afraid of Genny working you too hard?"

"Not I. I am here to work hard."

"You're not obliged to work exactly, though Mr. Genny likes to see his pupils making themselves generally useful—especially in harvest time. When you want any relaxation, we'll go over Welsdon Castle."

"Is there a castle in the neighbourhood?"

"There are the remains of a castle—uncommonly interesting remains too. They are on the Freemantle estate."

"That girl who was here this evening—is she employed to show visitors over the ruins?" I said, remembering a portion of her previous remarks.

"Yes, she is."

Mr. Grey became purple in the face, coughed violently, ran his hands through his light curly hair, suddenly veered round and knocked over his hair-brush, and a couple of pomatum pots. I was heart-free, and inclined to be chief inquisitor

"A friend of yours?"

"I never said so," he replied hoarsely, as he stooped to pick up the articles appertaining to his toilet-table.

"No, but I thought so, Grey"

"What the deuce made you think that?"

"She took me for a gentleman of the name of Grey this evening, and—"

"And what?" he cried, gasping for breath.

"And tugged at my hair very unceremoniously whilst I was writing."

"By George, that's good. Did she, though?"

And William Grey sat on the edge of his bedstead, and laughed very heartily at the mistake.

"You must have stared a little," said he. "What a young kitten she is! Well for her, perhaps, that she has such life and spirits, seeing what a dark background there is to her young life. A good girl, who fights against the horrors bravely."

"Indeed!"

"She has a devil of a father," he said confidentially

"I know it."

"Why, you know everything!" cried he in amazement.

"I believe I saw that gentleman rather the worse for liquor last night at the 'Haycock Inn.'"

"If you ever see him anything else, bless your eyes, for it'll be a rare sight. He possesses the one virtue of loving his daughter a little ; that's all I can say of that black-muzzled old scamp. She was glad to get away from her home, and become even a show-girl to the ruins of Welsdon Castle."

"Why isn't she here ?"

"Genny don't take kindly to the Ricksworths—the father has been tried on and off half-a-dozen times, and always been found grievously wanting. And Genny is a man who makes the whole family answer for the sins of the one. He has his likes and his dislikes, after the usual fashion. But you look drowsy ?"

"I sat up last night, and our friend Thirsk was restless in the next room."

"A restless fellow. Whatever made him think of the farming, I wonder ?"

"I wonder, too."

"Not a bad sort though—a trifle too sharp, perhaps, take him for all in all. Well, good-night, young farmer."

"Good-night to you."



## CHAPTER V

### LIFE BEGINS.

MR. MATTHEW GENNY did not intend his farm pupils to be idle. The harvest was coming on, and the services of three vigorous young men would save something from current expenses, if they could be turned to any account before the busy season set in.

"A man to be a good farmer should know how to sow, mow, and reap," was Genny's axiom. "I passed through all the grades myself and have saved many a good poond."

by my knowledge of what was a fair day's work. Now, who be afraid of work, to begin with?"

" Didn't I tell you yesterday that I was afraid of nothing? " said Thirsk. " I'm in a rare mood for hard work to-day."

" Ay, and that's more than ye were yesterday."

" I was tired—out of sorts—spiteful—anything! Why shouldn't a man be as variable in his moods as the sky that frowns or smiles over his head? If I work very hard to-day, set it in the balance against a slack time when my patience gives way. Now, then, what can I do to show you what a promising pupil you have? "

" Ipps can teach ye to handle a scythe."

" Ipps for ever! Ipp, Ipp, hurrah! " cried Thirsk, wildly. " Where's that ruddy skeleton to be found? "

" By the plantation."

Thirsk started at once, and though Genny called after him half-a-dozen instructions, he was too excited or too indifferent to attend to them.

" Mayhap he's half-mad, " muttered Genny to himself; " Robin told me two days ago I should not make much oot of him—but if he loikes to spend forty pounds in learning the farming, why, I have no particular objection. Still, " with a shake of his head, " I've a mortal dislike to taking mooney for no mooney's worth. Will ye put yourself in Mr. Grey's charge for a day, Mr. Neider? "

" Willingly."

" He's a good hand, moind ye."

And with this compliment to his favourite pupil Mr. Genny left us.

The story of my farming progress is not the story that I have set myself to write—I need not dwell at any great length on the details of my second day at Follingay farm. Suffice it to say that it was a hard day's work—it seemed the hardest that my life had hitherto known—and that it was more difficult because I used my best exertions to " work with a will, " and take an interest in the labour of my hands. But it became pure mechanism, and my thoughts went far away from Welsdon.

This continual absence of mind irritated me; I was new to my work, and made no allowances. I had expected to

change like a harlequin as if all the thoughts of a life could be puffed away by a breath !

That evening I found my desk and travelling-case in the parlour, and was informed that Ipps had carried my trunk and portmanteau to my room. I intended to sit up later that evening than the rest, and amuse myself with a small bonfire in the kitchen-range ; so, with a nod to Grey, and a "don't wait," I remained at my open desk after his and Thirsk's departure.

" Shall ye be long up, Mr. Neider ? " asked Genny, nibbling at the stem of his after-supper pipe.

" Not a great while," I answered. " Am I infringing your rules ? "

" Ay, a little. Harriet always looks about her for the last thing."

" I will not keep her waiting a great while."

Ten minutes afterwards I was in the kitchen of Follingay farm, with a bundle of manuscripts under my arm. In the kitchen I met Miss Genny, who looked with surprise at my huge parcel.

" What is the matter, Mr. Neider ? "

" Nothing, Miss Genny. I have a few papers that are better in the fire than anywhere else. Will you allow me to consume them ? "

" I can urge no objection."

She stood by the mantelpiece, and watched the proceedings with interest. I do not know whether my face betrayed any undue excitement, but as the first leaves fluttered amongst the red coals, she said—

" Have you well considered this step ? "

" Yes, Miss Genny."

" I think it is a rash one."

" I am not conscious of having made a rash step in my life."

" You are a fortunate man."

" Are you smiling at my vanity, Miss Genny ? "

" Perhaps I am."

I added a fresh pile to the flames, and she continued to watch the operation.

" Are you aware that I am a curious woman ? " she said, abruptly.

“I was not aware of it before.”

“I hate mystery, and pretence of mystery, in any shape and form,” she said ; “my hard and practical life prefers a plain reason for a simple action. May I ask what those papers contain ?”

I smiled, and she said sharply,

“Haven’t I confessed to being a curious woman ?”

“There is no mystery, only a little self-sacrifice. The consigning to the red embers many follies and ambitions,—schemes of advancement, of fame, and a name in the world. There are they smouldering, and the hand of a father consigns to the flames all his offspring !”

“You are a Spartan ?”

“No ; a German.”

“You are an author ?” she asked, with more acerbity.

“No.”

“No ?” she said, as if doubting the fact.

“Once I had hoped to be one,” I said, a little mournfully ; “I have made more than one endeavour to rush into print, and I have learned what a hard task it is ! I was becoming dreamy and theoretical—seeing in everything round me but romance and poetry, and losing the sober chances of life in a fog of idealism. I have only woke up, Miss.”

“You are a strange young man.”

“Simply a firm one.”

“Is firmness, after all, a virtue ?”

“Ill-tempered people call it obstinacy.”

“That’s true.”

She suddenly laid her hand upon my arm.

“I am a year or two your senior, I daresay, and may take the liberty of offering you a little advice. Don’t burn any more of those papers.”

“They are worth nothing.”

“I do not suppose for an instant that there is a valuable copyright amongst them, but still I say, don’t burn them. It seems hard that the work of long days and nights should thus be ended unceremoniously.”

“Miss Genny, these papers are tempters. I brought them with me from Cumberland—I had not made up my mind then to part with them. But, I feel that they would lure me back to the old dreamy world, and make the life I have

chosen distasteful. And it is the life that I have promised my father."

"What, another promise!"

"Yes."

"Did he object to authorship and authors?"

"He saw which way I was drifting, and he possibly knew the extent of my abilities, and what they would end in. He spoke of his farm and my mother—my uncle was a German author, who died mad—and he begged me to follow his profession, and abjure that which must infallibly deceive me. He would have died unhappy; he was right, too—and I promised."

"And you consider yourself bound by that promise?" she asked, with great eagerness.

"Yes."

"It was a cruel one!" she responded.

"Why?" I asked, suddenly, almost angrily.

She had been watching the packet of papers consume and shrivel to nothingness; she seemed to have drifted away on a current of thoughts foreign to mine, for she started at my imperious question, and seemed endeavouring to collect her ideas before she answered. I was surprised to see how pale she had become.

"For a dying man or woman to exact a promise from a son, daughter, wife, husband, or friend, is cruel and unjust. Why should the one, on the verge of another world, know what is best for those left behind, or seek to bind them to what may be irreparably wrong. Your father acted for the best, but his judgment was shallow, and his exactation was a coward's."

"Miss Genny!"

"Mr. Neider, are you going to fritter away any more time over your foolish task?"

"Foolish!" I said, conscious that my temper was fading ungracefully away. "Miss Genny is pleased to be abrupt."

"I beg your pardon. I forgot our early acquaintance."

"Pray don't mention it."

"I am a hasty woman, and inclined to speak my mind. But then I am old enough to be your mother."

I could not help laughing at this.

"Some two years my senior at least, you say."

"And twenty-two in my knowledge of life."

"Really!" was my satirical response.

"You don't know what life is—yours has been a 'foggy idealism.'"

"Ah! you sting me with my own words."

"Will you go up stairs, if you please?" she said, severely.  
"I want to make quite sure you haven't set the chimney on fire."

"Will you not take my word for it?"

"No."

"Good-night, Miss."

She did not answer; she had moved towards the door that led into the farm-yard, and was coolly withdrawing the bolts.

"Stay a moment."

She flung the door wide and looked out. The dog came bounding towards her, but she put him aside with an abrupt "Down, Nero!" looked round the yard for a moment, and then re-entered the kitchen and bolted the door again.

"Good-night, Mr. Neider."

"Is anything the matter?"

"Nothing."

I went up stairs to my room, wherein William Grey was peacefully snoring. A hasty glance assured me of the absence of my luggage, for which I had waited two days.

"Hollo here!" I exclaimed aloud, and a "Hollo there!" sounded from the bed-clothes, in the midst of which William Grey, with a very rough head of hair, loomed up and stared at me.

"What's the row, Neider?"

"Nothing particular—I did not mean to wake you."

"Oh! didn't you?" said he, looking aggrieved; "well, it's the second time I have been roused from my innocent rest. Were you in the yard just now?"

"No, but Miss Genny was."

"Eh?"

I repeated my assertion.

"It couldn't have been Miss Genny though. I fancied perhaps you and Thirsk were up to your larks, and pitching all the loose gravel you could find at those window-panes."

"I was not in so facetious a mood, Grey, and Thirsk has been in his room this hour."

"So he has—well, perhaps it was a dream," he said with a yawn; "but what the deuce did you begin shouting for?"

"I missed my trunks."

"They're in Thirsk's room. Ipps took them there by mistake."

"I should like my portmanteau, if I thought this were one of Thirsk's sitting-up nights."

"He's rather proud of being a late bird. You may as well wake him up as the rest of us," he added drily.

After considering the matter for a moment, I took my night-lamp and went on to the landing. A light tap at the door eliciting no response, I knocked somewhat louder, and called Thirsk's name through the key-hole. No answer following, I was about to turn away, when a suspicion of the stillness within being a little unnatural, led me to try the handle of the door. To my surprise the door opened to my touch—it had been hastily locked, but the bolt had not caught the hasp. My night-lamp lighted the room wherein the blundering Ipps had carefully piled my trunk and portmanteau,—lighted the empty room.

Nicholas Thirsk was not there!



## CHAPTER VI.

### BUYING A FRIEND.

MR. NICHOLAS THIRSK's disappearance rendered me doubtful of my next step. I was perplexed at his absence, and at a loss to account for it. My first idea was to return to Grey, and put a few questions to him; the second to descend to the kitchen and ask Miss Genny if she had seen Mr. Thirsk—both of which ideas were quickly abandoned.

After all, it might be—possibly was—but a mere freak of

my new acquaintance ; he had evinced more than once an eccentricity, either natural or feigned, and it would be taking an unfriendly step to direct general notice to his temporary absence. I was not at Follingay farm to act either as a spy or informer, and I resolved to leave Mr. Thirsk to himself.

Still I was a little curious, and instinctively I crossed the room to the window, and looked out. Immediately beneath the window there sloped the tiled roof of an out-house attached to the farm kitchen, a drop from which to the farm-yard might be easily made. To a man as tall and as agile as Nicholas Thirsk it was equally as easy to re-ascend ; and if that gentleman were addicted to moonlight flittings, his anxiety to retain that particular room, and to make friends with one particular dog, was now readily accountable. Mr. Thirsk was a man with no small amount of forethought : I gave him credit for forethought, and did not call it craftiness—I had never been inclined to judge too hastily.

So I left Mr. Thirsk to himself ; he did not cross my line of action, or interfere with my wishes. I had come for my portmanteau, and presumed that I might take the liberty of conveying it to my own room during his absence ; it was his own fault that he had not been there to grant me permission, or had not informed me of Ipp's mistake at an earlier hour.

I secured my portmanteau, repaired to my room, and, resisting the temptation to sit up an hour or two, and see what time Mr. Thirsk might consider it expedient to return, I extinguished my light and went to bed.

In the morning Mr. Thirsk rattled at my room door at an early hour.

“Sleepers, awake !” he cried ; “here's Mr. Genny rampant below, and swearing that we are bringing Follingay farm into disrepute.”

“What is the time ?”

“Just six.”

“Bless my soul, how I have slept !” said Grey, turning hastily out of bed. “Just six !—I haven't been up so late since the winter.”

We were down stairs and were in the fields half-an-hour afterwards. Mr. Genny looked cross and satirical at our tardy appearance.

"It's small farmers the three of ye will make," he said, "if ye go on at this rate. Perhaps some of ye don't sleep well," and I fancied he glanced rather sharply at Thirsk.

"I am not quite used to early hours, but I'm running gradually into the groove."

"Ay."

It seemed an "Ay" a trifle more significant than usual; but Thirsk appeared not to remark it, and Grey, who had an easy conscience, disregarded it.

Thirsk took the first opportunity of speaking to me alone that day.

"You were a late visitor to my room last night, Neider?"

"Ay," I answered, with what I considered a very good imitation of Mr. Genny's manner.

"You are pleased to be facetious this morning. The country air is freshening you up."

"I hope so."

"You wanted your portmanteau, and broke into my room to procure it."

"I am not in the habit of breaking in, nor breaking out of a room," was my response; "you had locked the door on the wrong side of the hasp."

"And you took advantage of it."

"And took off my portmanteau—exactly."

He looked steadily at me, almost impertinently, but I did not flinch from his gaze.

"You Germans and half-Germans," he said, "seem wonderfully disregardful of the common rules of civilised life. Have you ever heard our proverb, that 'an Englishman's house is his castle?'"

"And an Englishman's room, too," I answered; "you are in the right, Mr. Thirsk. And I knocked at that Englishman's door for some minutes, before I took the liberty of trying its security."

"And echo only answering, enter Alfred Neider, like a thief in the night."

"Nicholas Thirsk having made an exit out of the window, like a thief with his booty," I retorted.

Thirsk wheeled round very fiercely, and regarded me again.

I did not flinch from him, or feel daunted by his fierce looks. I was as tall as he, and certainly as strong.

“How do you know that I went out of the window?”

“I guessed it.”

“You guessed right for once,” was the short answer; “but before old Genny was constituted your father-confessor, you might have made quite sure.”

“I have confessed nothing to Mr. Genny, neither my sins nor your own,” said I. “I am a half-German, you remember, and I fancy the Germans in general mind their own business, rather more than the English.”

“Oh! it’s no secret—I make no secret of it,” said Thirsk, carelessly; but I was convinced that his manner began to change from that instant. Before then he had been harsh in his comments, and inclined to quarrel; now he gradually assumed his usual mood.

“Neither your sins nor my own!” he said, commenting on my last speech; “I don’t know what skeleton closet you may have, Neider, here or at home—but I am *sans peur et sans reproche*. If I go to my room at an infernally early hour, in accordance with the wishes of our liege lord, the farmer, I am not bound to stay there, in defiance of my own.”

“Still you might as well have left home by the door.”

“And had some one to sit up for me, and been lectured concerning late hours, and been preached at by a hook-nosed farmer for the remainder of the week. Weren’t you up late enough, reprobate, to be flirting in the kitchen with that farmer’s daughter at eleven at night?”

“I don’t understand flirting, Thirsk. And were I inclined to indulge in the art, I very much doubt if Miss Genny would second me.”

“Oh! These farmers’ daughters are exceedingly sly!”

“But she’s a farmer’s niece.”

“Ah! I had forgotten. Well, you didn’t flirt, but you talked of death-bed promises, and withered hopes, and other sentimentalities—like a couple of young doves, new-fledged from the ‘Minerva Press.’”

“Where were you?” I asked quickly.

“Close to the door, struggling to open that accursed

obstinate wicket to the left, which leads to the garden, and so *en route* to the high road, whereon one can smoke a cigar in peace, and enjoy the fresh air. Miss Genny nearly caught me, though."

And he laughed heartily at the reminiscence.

"If I were you, Thirsk, I would not try the window again."

"Why not?" was the response following quickly and sharply on my suggestion.

"Genny's a firm man, I should say, and might take the liberty of firing at a strange figure wandering about his premises at unseasonable hours. There's a good fowling-piece in his bed-room."

"Neider, I like danger. I would run into it at any time, for the pleasure of the excitement it causes. I am a child fond of playing with fire, though I have made up my mind that the flames shall not master me. I stick to the window till Mr. Genny objects, or you betray me, if it be only for the pleasure of dodging the farmer's gun."

"You will betray yourself shortly, if you amuse yourself with wandering to the back of the house, and flinging stones at my window."

Thirsk was silent several minutes. He walked by my side with his hands clasped behind him, studying the close turf of the meadow, across which we were wandering, under the impression that we were looking after the farm stock. He was silent so long that I thought he had forgotten the subject, till he said suddenly—

"It was a wild freak altogether—I must be a little more cautious, if I wish to keep my secret!"

"You object to mystery, too?" I said, thinking of Miss Genny.

"Do I make a mystery of it?" he asked; "is there any mystery in smoking a cigar on the high road?"

"Not much; if you do not risk breaking your neck for your stroll."

"I have risked breaking my neck fifty times for a more foolish object. What's my neck worth?" he added, with an intensity of bitterness that showed how variable were his thoughts, and even how unsettled his mind; "who would give a crown for its preservation intact? and how many

would double the *douceur* to hear it was broken ? I stand in the crowd, with the world against me, Neider."

"Nonsense."

"I'm a poor man, and a poor man has no friends."

There was a hidden mournfulness that betrayed itself in the midst of the bitterness of his words, and I felt drawn towards him. In our first meeting he had exercised a certain power over me, which I withstood or concealed —the interest which he had awakened in me then had not died out. I felt that, if he were a rash man, he was a mistaken one ; to a great extent his own enemy, and answerable for that peculiar position to which he seemed, at times, inclined to direct general attention.

Once or twice it had struck me that he was offering that past as an excuse for his present actions—whatever they might be, or whithersoever they were leading him. That he was unsettled, even unhappy, I was to a certain extent convinced ; that he had been a different, perhaps a better man in the past, there was but little doubt.

"That is a morbid reasoning, Thirsk, which sets up poverty as a barrier to friendship. Poverty only tests the real friends, and sends the false to the shadows to which they naturally belong."

"My friends are all in shadow-land then ; there was not a true one amongst the lot. Plenty of money to pay for plenty to drink, and, ye gods, what a myriad of honest fellows round me ! "

"You don't grieve at their loss, Thirsk ? "

"I never grieve—I give no thoughts to the yesterday or to the morrow—I am a devil-may-care fellow. As for the old friends, I shall whistle them all back again twelve months hence."

"How's that ? "

"There's only one way," he said, carelessly ; "for the present, let me be content with isolation."

"That will be your own fault, then."

"Do you think there is a man in the world would lend me five pounds ? " he cried, mockingly ; "come, I test your friendship, your good feeling. You, the rich man who are to inherit a fair farm and fat acres, and can afford to fling a hundred pounds away to learn the peddling tricks which the

vulgar mind of Genny can teach you—I test you—do you hear?"

"Well?"

"Bulwer's hero, in his feigned poverty, asked for five pounds for a poor old nurse, and his friends turned away; I, in my real destitution, ask the same sum of a man who possibly has it to spare."

"Have I owned to much superfluous cash?"

"You have owned to nothing, that I can remember."

"Well, I will own to being far from a rich man, the heir to a very small farm, the support of a very dear mother; and there's my five pounds at your service."

And I took five sovereigns from my purse, and placed them in his hands.

He turned them over once or twice in his dark palm, irresolutely. I fancied that his face even changed colour, but it was momentary, if I were even right in my surmise.

"I did not expect this," he muttered.

"You are an unfair judge of human nature."

"I am run a little close—I'll take the loan," he said, "if I am not pressing you too hard?"

"I can spare five pounds," I replied.

He held his right hand towards me, and I shook hands with him. His grip was hard and earnest and made me wince again.

"I count on *one* friend yet," he said meaningly.

"How soon we veer round!" cried I, laughing.

"The friendship of Nicholas Thirsk, gentleman scapegrace, bought for five pounds!" said he lightly. "Neider, some of these days, these early days, ere we country clodhoppers drink the harvest beer—I'll tell you a story."

But the harvest beer was drunk, the harvest moon went down later and later every night, before he told me. I had guessed one-half his secret ere he took me into his confidence.

## CHAPTER VII.

## WELSDON CHURCH.

WHETHER Nicholas Thirsk still amused himself and whiled away the night by clambering in and out of his bed-room window, at unseasonable times, was a matter of some doubt. I did not seek to discover, and Thirsk offered me no information.

Sunday morning came round in due course, and Genny presented himself at the breakfast-table furbished up for the occasion.

“Ye gents are going to church, I suppose,” he asked, “with me and Mr. Grey?—and my niece,” he added, after a pause; “it’s a good habit.”

“Surely it is something more than a habit, uncle?” gently replied Harriet.

“Ay,” he responded, “sure and it be. There’s a good pew of our’n for ye, lads, and the parson’ll think it odd if there’s much stopping away.”

“Mr. Neider seems to require a great deal of pressing,” said Thirsk with a laugh.

“I intend to go to church,” I said briefly. I was upon the point of adding that I was a regular church-goer, thanks to the careful teaching of my mother, when I thought that information was uncalled for, and of a certainty only concerned my humble self.

“And Mr. Thirsk?” said Genny; “I’m incloined to think he woan’t want much pressing.”

“I’m a Dissenter.”

“Ay, ay—I didn’t know that.”

“I like a rousing sermon, and some good thumping of cushions, and a hoarse voice bellowing at a poor sinner the most unutterable woe. That’s the style, and beats the Church of England into fits.”

Harriet Genny frowned a little over her breakfast-cup. She was a staid girl, to whom such an exhibition of irreverence was painful. Still she kept her opinions to herself, which was more than her uncle did.

“If it worn’t Sunday, I’d say, ‘darned if that ain’t a queer way of talking !’” remarked Genny ; “and I’m of opinion, moind ye, that ye and my dog Nero indulge in about the same style of religious sentiment.”

“Nero’s a good dog,” was the cool response.

“Ay.”

“My wardrobe hasn’t arrived yet, or I would try church by way of a change,” continued Thirsk ; “but when my coat’s somewhat seedy, my spotted blue choker in the box at home, and there remains no macassar oil or fatty matter for a fellow’s head, what’s the use of setting up for a Christian ?”

Mr. Genny, whose thin hair was certainly plastered to his head, and who wore a spotted “blue choker” himself, compressed his lips, and looked out of the corners of his little grey eyes at the speaker. Genny was of a temper the reverse of peaceful at times, and might have possibly responded, had not his niece created a diversion by rising.

“Then you do not accompany us, Mr. Thirsk ?”

“‘My poverty, but not my will’—refuses.”

“There’s the bells a-ringing,” commented Genny.

“What a hideous, cracked peal,” said Thirsk ; “surely a disgrace to these aristocratic quarters.”

“Ay, they’ve talked of changing the bells more than once. There’s a subscription ye can put your name doon for.”

“That’s worth knowing.”

“Headed by Sir Richard Freemantle, Mr. Genny, and other aristocratic parties,” said Genny, drily.

“Talking of Sir Richard—we shall see him at church this morning, I suppose ?” said Grey.

“Noa—he was shaken up too much in the train, and be not yet presentable, I believe,” said Genny ; “but ye’ll have a chance of seeing his sister for the first time in your loife. Now, gentlemen, if ye please, we’ll be moving.”

Grey and I seized our hats, and followed Mr. Genny through the farm-yard to the Welsdon road, along which Harriet Genny had already proceeded.

Etiquette sent me after Miss Genny, to whom I offered my arm, who thanked me, but declined the escort. Whether I

looked discomfited or vexed, I know not, but Miss Genny said—

“ You are in country quarters, remember, Mr. Neider. Half Welsdon would be telling the other half we were going to be married next week.”

She said it in her usual brusque manner with a lip that curled a little at Welsdon folk in general.

“ I should not have thought that you were one to study the world very closely, Miss Genny.”

“ I dislike to be talked about,” was the quick response.

“ Well, it’s not pleasant,” said I; “ and if public opinion distresses you too much, why, I’ll forego the pleasure.”

“ That is a bad imitation of Mr. Thirsk,” she said.

“ You don’t admire Mr. Thirsk’s manner ? ”

“ Do you ? ”

“ Not always—it perplexes me.”

“ Then why make an effort to imitate him.”

“ I beg pardon. I was not aware that I was attempting to copy a manner which appears to have given you offence.”

“ I never take offence—of a Sunday,” she added, by way of correction.

I laughed, and she looked indignantly at me. Miss Genny was evidently of an irritable turn, and perhaps I *was* in one of Thirsk’s aggravating moods, for I confess to a secret sort of pleasure I took in making her face flush, and in meeting the flash of her great hazel eyes. She looked prettier, too, when animated, and less grave, or sullen, or thoughtful, or whatever mood it might be that gave that impenetrable look to her face.

“ What makes you laugh at me ? ”

“ I hardly know—your reservation, I suppose, Miss Genny.”

“ You’re aware that we are going to church ? ”

“ Oh ! yes.”

“ I thought that you had forgotten it.”

“ Why ? ”

“ My idea is, that people proceeding to church should give a little thought with regard to the object that takes them there. Only *my* idea, understand ? ”

“That may be of consequence.”

She looked at me again, but did not reply.

“I’m not satirical—pray don’t misconstrue everything I say and do, Miss Genny—it is an idea of consequence, because it’s the right idea.”

“Don’t make me forget it, then !”

“I’ll say no more. Will you allow me to carry that prayer-book ?”

It was a ponderous volume. An old-fashioned prayer-book, with a dark roan cover, weighing altogether a couple of pounds or more. Miss Genny was tenacious and suspicious, she would see a covert meaning in everything I said.

“You are laughing at this weighty book, Mr. Neider.”

“Upon my honour, I am not.”

“It was my mother’s, Sir.”

“Upon my honour——” I repeated, seeing that she was troubled, but she would not allow me to finish my question, and turned back to speak to her uncle. She had her hand upon her uncle’s arm the next moment, and I was left to Mr. Grey’s society.

Grey looked at me with a sly expression, when we were a little distance behind Mr. Genny and niece.

“Been attempting the amiable, old fellow ?”

“I have been attempting that which I considered common politeness.”

“Ah ! Harriet Genny objects to politeness—so it didn’t answer.”

“I’m aware of it.”

“And yet she’s the best girl under the sun,” said Grey ; “or rather one of the best girls spoiled.”

“What do you mean ?”

“That farming life, a practical, unimaginative uncle, and a hard, busy existence, without companionship of her own age and sex, have tended to spoil her and her temper,” said Grey ; “my idea is, that too much responsibility was placed in her hands after her mother’s death—that she was brought here a girl of seventeen, and made Genny’s housekeeper almost in spite of herself.”

“In spite of herself ?” said I. “She seems attached to her uncle.”

"Oh, yes ; and he's attached to her. But their natures are exactly opposite, and—here's the church, and—by George, here's Thirsk !"

"Of course he is," said Thirsk behind us. "Look alive, young men—the five minute bell is just over, and I wouldn't miss a word of the service for forty shillings."

We were nearing Welsdon church ; a little stone edifice, with ivy covering its walls, and trailing over its lancet windows, and making way slowly and surely up the sturdy church tower, whence had rung out the peal of bells which Mr. Thirsk had criticised. The white country road was dotted with a few late villagers in their Sunday's best, hurrying like ourselves to church, through the doors of which Mr. Genny led the way. An oaken pew, as time-worn and notched as an old carpenter's bench, of square dimensions, and full of unwieldy dropsical hassocks, over which it was a general rule to stumble, before a final settlement.

Being a square pew, the seats were fixed on all sides save the door, consequently two rows of inmates faced each other, omnibus fashion, and looked like a private party enjoying themselves after a dismal fashion of their own. These little parties were dotted all over the church, and separated by a long line of free seats in the centre of the middle aisle ; amidst these seats I noticed Mr. Ipps, in a gorgeous velvet waistcoat, the old lady who had fetched Mr. Ricksworth home from the "Haycock Inn," and the young lady who had pulled my hair.

A fine old church, albeit of small dimensions, was this antique church of Welsdon—the resort of antiquarians, architects, and artists out on a sketching tour, and those ubiquitous photographers whom you meet everywhere now, even on the top of Mont Blanc. The organ pealed forth, and recalled my attention to matters less mundane ; and Mr. Genny, turning round from a somewhat formal sprawl on his knees, with his head in his hat, looked in no small degree astonished at the propinquity of Nicholas Thirsk.

"Ay !" I heard him mutter under his breath, before clearing his throat for the first verse of the morning hymn.

The service began, and a very feeble, white-haired old gentleman, in a voice more weak and feeble than even his

appearance warranted, began to read after the first hymn. A dull, inane kind of reading, which soon exerted a soporific effect on the hard-workers in the free seats—the farm labourers and village worthies, who had come with a good motive, or in deference to the wishes of their better halves—and the frequency of head-noddings and head-jerkings right and left, and backwards and forwards, had a peculiar effect, and made one dizzy. At the end of the first lesson of the day there was a general wake-up of the congregation ; wheels grated on the gravel-drive outside, the beadle flung back the doors, the palsied pew-opener dropped her prayer-book, in her flurry to open the door of a pew near the pulpit, and half-a-dozen youths in smock frocks shuffled their hob-nailed boots with suppressed excitement. Harriet Genny and Mr. Grey were about the two most unconcerned in the sacred edifice ; Nicholas Thirsk possibly the most curious. So curious that he very coolly stepped over the hassock into my place, as the congregation rose for the *Te Deum Laudamus*.

“Here’s the cream of Welsdon in the Woods, and the accomplished baronet’s sister, Neider. Keep your eyes open,” he whispered.

I was frowning a rebuke at him, when a tall, thin, high-shouldered man, with a bloodless face, and a strip of black plaster meandering across the bridge of his nose and left eyebrow, came into church in a stiff-backed manner, followed by a pale-faced, sharp-featured girl of eighteen or nineteen. There was general attention to the new-comers, and little attention to the psalm—country eyes distended, and the lower jaws of three-fourths of the congregation dropped with wonder. The clerk under the reading-desk left off his sepulchral bass, and remained open-mouthed ; and even the clergyman looked inclined to exclaim, “How d’ye do, Sir Richard? Glad to see you back again in England, and not so much hurt as people supposed.”

Sir Richard paused at his pew, and allowed his sister to precede him ; then followed, and took his seat close to the door—so close that the pew-opener shut the tails of his coat in, and had to be beckoned back, and reproved in a husky whisper. But the excitement finally subsided, and save a few whose curiosity was not likely to be satiated till

one o'clock, general attention became directed to the morning service.

I was surprised to witness the great degree of reverence exhibited by Mr. Thirsk after the appearance of the Freemantles—the rigid attention to his book, and the strict observance of religious forms. He imitated Mr. Genny in a great degree, and knelt amongst the hassocks when necessary, in a corner of the pew, and buried his face even in his arms.

During the first hymn Sir Richard Freemantle's head turned in his stiff cravat, and a pair of small grey eyes took stock of his many dependants and tenants sprinkled about the church. I was looking in his direction, when his face turned suddenly towards us, and the inmates of our pew became the objects of his special attention. I shall not forget the change on that hitherto statuesque countenance—the rush of blood to the face, the surprised look of the eyes, the nervous clutch of a gloved hand on the door of his pew. Nicholas Thirsk was standing by my side, was nearest the aisle, and I fancied must be the object at which the baronet stared so hard, despite the unmoved features of my fellow-pupil in farming. Thirsk looked straight before him at the minister, and sang his loudest from the hymn-book in his hand, and took no heed of the attention his presence appeared to create. One or two in the free seats, who had not grown tired of watching the movements of the magnate of the village, looked towards Thirsk also, after the baronet's exhibition of astonishment, and perceiving Thirsk's abstraction, favoured me with their notice, and thought, probably, that they had found the right one at last. But Sir Richard's surprise was soon over ; his eyes wandered round the church—right round to the organ-loft over the entrance door, and back by the side aisle on his extreme left, till they were level with his own pew again, and his sister within it, at whose bonnet he stared for a moment before turning his attention to the gilt-edged hymn-book in his hand ; that book from which he never again raised his eyes, which he held open during the sermon, thereby personally offending his particular friend, the rector of Welsdon church.

A dreary, flat, unprofitable sermon—a satire in its delivery, and in him who delivered it, on church preachers

and church preferments—muttered by a toothless old gentleman, whose age rendered him unfit for every office under Heaven, more especially for that great, grand one which is considered in this age a fair business speculation. There were not twenty people awake in the church, and the heavy snoring of Mr. Ipps, a few seats in the rear, had more than once to be checked by a spiteful nudge in his side from the pew-opener.

The sermon was concluded at five minutes past one—bad preachers are fond of long sermons—and Sir Richard Freemantle and his sister were the first to depart. No one in the church had moved—no one would have been so deficient in politeness as to have preceded the lord of the manor. Had any unruly lads made a dash for the sunshine outside in the old graveyard, they would have been collared by an indignant beadle, and well shaken for their breach of decorum. A general clicking of pew-locks after Sir Richard had advanced a few paces, and then the organ playing a lively kind of march,—as if by way of compliment to Sir Richard, and symbolical of the good spirits of his tenantry, and the congregation flowing on at the heels of the *élite*.

Coming out of church not a few of the congregation were surprised to find the carriage still waiting, Miss Freemantle ensconced therein, the red silk blinds drawn down, and Sir Richard himself, very erect and starchy, standing under the carved stone porch.

Thirsk had his hand upon my arm ; I felt it suddenly withdrawn, then as suddenly replaced.

“ What does it matter ? ” he muttered. “ Sooner or later it must come.”

The watchful little eyes of the baronet singled out Nicholas Thirsk as we emerged into the churchyard.

“ Mr. Thirsk,” said the baronet, advancing, “ I wish to speak with you.”

“ I have nothing to say to you, Sir Richard,” was the haughty response.

“ But, Sir, I have something to say to *you*.”

“ Our ways are different; our thoughts are not in common ; there is no love lost between us. Why should I pay deference to *your* wishes ? ”

“ What are you doing in Welsdon ? ”

"Learning an honest business—is that strange?"

"You are here for a motive—the old foolish wilful motive; don't deny it."

"You are welcome to believe what you please, Sir."

"You must leave here, do you hear?" said the baronet.

"Isn't this village large enough for you and me?"

"It is not."

"Then go!" almost shouted Thirsk, stamping on the gravel in his rage. "I have been hunted to the death by you—and I will not stir again!"

They were the only words that could have been caught up by the curious crowd; question and answer, sting and retort, had been whispered cautiously, if harshly, and Thirsk's elevated voice surprised the baronet even more than the anxious congregation. He turned away with a strange embarrassed look, and entered the carriage, from which one pale face, shadowed by light flaxen ringlets, looked for a moment hastily.

"So let him go, and my curse go with him to his death!"

"Thirsk! Thirsk!" I cried.

"I am a beggar, and that man is answerable for my low estate. He shall remember it before long."

"It is strange!"

"Yes. For the present leave it strange. Some day I will make a clean breast of it."

The carriage whirled away to the Hall; the crowd of church folk streamed its divers ways; the new generation went stepping over the graves of the old; the birds darted in and out of their nests in the ivy; the organ in the old church pealed harmoniously forth into the flower-scented air.

A peaceful, picturesque scene enough—type of a hundred thousand similar in our English villages on a Sabbath-day—so like to this, and yet so different!

For, from the portals of God's house will step the dark thoughts to the sunshine. Unmoved by the holy teaching within the temple, there passes out to the world some child of that darkness wherein envy and hatred are nursed. Here and there a simple, guileless heart, but here and there a thoughtless, reckless being, such as he whose arm was linked within my own.

With thoughts that were stern and manifold, and concern-

ing which I knew little, went Nicholas Thirsk. That they *were* stern thoughts, boding no good, I could judge by his face. A more decisive, cruel-looking face I had not glanced at, until that troubled hour which was upon him then.

“Where’s Genny ?” he said, looking round.

“They were not with us—they have heard nothing.”

“And I can trust you ?”

“Yes.”

“There shall soon be no secrets between you and me, Neider. I think that you will be my one friend, after all.”

“If I might offer you some little help—advise you just a little, for your good.”

“Neider, old fellow, there *was* good in me four years ago—but it was starved out of me.”

I shall never forget his look.

END OF THE FIRST BOOK.

## BOOK II.

“LOVE MATTERS.”

“Under the rose, there was a gentleman  
Came in at the wicket.”

CHAPMAN.

“Is this your sweetheart? I had need wish you much joy, for I see  
but a little towards.”

HEYWOOD.

## CHAPTER I.

## THE CASTLE RUINS.

It was an early harvest that year. A good harvest, at which farmers rubbed their hands, and the papers congratulated the general public; for which people, extra grateful, returned thanks in church, and from which people in Mark Lane made their ten and twenty thousand pounds, and never thought of thanking anybody. A good harvest in the county of which Welsdon in the Woods formed a portion, and Mr. Genny with nothing to complain of.

Mr. Genny never owned to a successful season, lest his friends and neighbours should want to borrow a little money on the strength of it; it was never more than "tolerably fair," and Mr. Genny deposited his money in the county bank, and turned with renewed vigour to his land.

Mr. Genny worked us hard that harvest season, and if learning the farming consisted in slaving like negroes in the field, and getting one's hands as hard as iron, Mr. Grey and I made rapid progress in the profession that we had chosen. Mr. Thirsk was variable in his attention to business, and Mr. Genny had long since despaired of making a farmer of him.

"It's a question of boarding ye for six or eight months for forty poonds," he grumbled one day when Thirsk pleaded a headache, and refused to stir an inch beyond the farmhouse, "for its deevilish little use ye are to me, or credit to yeerself."

"Patience, my good Sir, patience!"

"Ay, I want it."

"I'm not obliged to serve you like one of your miserable farm labourers, I presume."

"Ye're not expected to idle your time away," said Genny, shortly.

"Good-morning, Sir!"

And Thirsk walked coolly up stairs.

"I'll gie him his forty pounds back!—I'll gie him his forty pounds back!" cried Genny, with a stamp of both feet; "and I woonder," suddenly turning to me, "what *you* can find in him to make such a friend of."

I did not feel called upon for a reply. I hardly knew even then whether Thirsk was a friend of mine or considered me a friend. If he objected to mystery, he was none the less an enigma to me.

"See if I don't gie him his forty pounds back," said Genny, for the third time, as he hurried away to his fields; but although my stay exceeded Thirsk's by many months, I was never summoned as witness to the transfer.

Mr. Genny's tempers were not so variable after the harvest was in, and all the nomadic tribes of reapers paid off. There was a lull in the bustle at the farm, and the farmer could smoke his pipe composedly, and not worry his pupils too much with his orders. William Grey still talked of going, and was only waiting the commands of his father the silversmith, he said; but though he received many letters from home, the commands were not included therein, or he never mentioned them if they were.

"When are you going over Welsdon Castle, Neider?" said Grey to me one fine Saturday afternoon; "it's a pity to lose a sight of the ruins this fine weather. When the wet season comes, the grounds are a trifle too sloppy."

"Are they open to visitors every day?"

"Only twice a week—Wednesdays and Saturdays," suggested Grey.

"When will you be at liberty to show me the wonders of the place?"

"I'm—I'm going that way to-day, if you feel inclined to accompany me."

"Willingly. Shall we ask Thirsk?"

"N—no. I think he would only refuse, and I don't like being said 'No' to. Besides, I don't know where he is."

"After all those reasons—let us be off."

Grey coloured a little. He had never taken kindly to Thirsk, although he had not cared to own his objections to much of satire and acrimony with which his fellow-pupil had favoured him. He owned them that day, however, as

we strolled along the country road. His was a frank nature, that spoke out.

"Thirsk isn't a fellow after my own heart," he said suddenly, "or we should have been stanch friends long since. I think that I must have done something early in life to offend him."

"It's only his way."

"And a confounded unpleasant way it is," he commented; "although I have become used to it now, and don't let it affect me. You don't happen to know if he be a nabob in disguise, Neider?"

"Why should I know more than yourself?"

"Well," with a peculiar intonation in his voice, that was the only sign of a difference in his equable temper, "he takes to you a little. You're about the only one on the farm he dosen't look at disparagingly. I wonder, now, what there is in you?"

And he broke into his hearty laugh, and threw his jealous symptoms overboard.

"I'm sure I cannot say, Grey," returned I, in the same light tone; "and I don't plead guilty to encouraging the attentions of Mr. Thirsk."

"Well," said he, passing his hands through his curly hair, after his usual habit, and sending his hat on one side, where he left it, "he's a man I can't make out exactly—not that that matters to him or me much. But if he would just stand a little less upon ceremony, it would be a trifle more comfortable. For he can be a 'jolly good fellow; ' once or twice last week he showed he had only to try."

"We'll not judge him too hastily, Grey."

"No, that's not fair," answered Grey; "and perhaps he's crossed in love—who knows?"

"Ah! who knows?"

"I don't think, if I was ever crossed in love," he said, with a solemnity that made me smile, "I should be so confoundedly disagreeable over it."

"Are you a philosopher?"

"Nothing like one—wouldn't be one if I could."

"May I ask how you would bear the full brunt of a disappointment of a tender nature?"

"Grin and bear it my boy!" he cried; "and when I

couldn't bear it, lock myself and my troubles in some dusty top room, until I was quite presentable to general society ”

“ Spoken like a philosopher, at least.”

“ I daresay I should be attacked with the worst sensations ; for upon my word, though you mayn't believe it, I'm not a hard-hearted young man.”

“ May your course of true love run as smooth as that brook,” I said, as we crossed a bridge at this juncture.

“ Thank you, Neider—when the time comes, let us hope so. And the same to you in a similar mess.”

I laughed.

“ For your time will come, I suppose, although I can't see the woman that's fit for you.”

“ What sort of woman would you recommend, Grey ?”

“ Well—I call you a kind of hard-headed chap, who requires to be in hot-water now and then, to bring forth all his virtues. I hardly know what young lady would suit you —” he said, reflectively, “ it's a toss up between a doll and a spitfire.”

“ Upon my word, you're complimentary ”

“ Oh ! I know you won't take offence, and it's a treat to be able to speak one's mind now and then,” said he ; “ I fancy Miss Genny would be a fit and proper companion, if somebody else wasn't after her.”

“ Who's that ? ”

“ Ah, lad ! how sharp we are ! ”

“ Don't be alarmed, Grey—I'm not falling in love with Miss Genny.”

“ All the better for you—for there's a long-moustached, bullet-headed young swell after her, I fancy.”

“ You fancy ? ”

“ Miss Genny don't make me her confidant, and one can't pump much out of the uncle. But if she don't take to her cousin Robin, it's odd if there isn't a little sneaking on his part—so, if your heart's touched, keep your eyes open.”

“ My heart's bullet-proof.”

“ Or arrow-proof, eh ? ” rejoined Grey. “ Alf Neider, you're a boaster—and, like all of the bombastic order, will

be the first to go to the wall. And, talking about walls, here are the ruins!"

And a picturesque ruin was Welsdon Castle—time-worn and ivy-grown, and with its stout walls rent in many places. Rumour said that that pile of stonework on the fair green slope had been built by hands that came over with the Cæsars; and if so, the place was a credit to its builders, and spoke of a knowledge of the best material, which present contractors have unhappily missed. The castle stretched over a fair expanse of ground, and the two round towers at the entrance-gates had roofs to them yet, and even half a staircase, which finished abruptly in mid-air and stone-crop. A stout oaken door, studded with huge nails, formed the entrance to the castle, although entrance might have been made in fifty places, and was made by Sir Richard Freemantle's sheep, on non-visiting days. But at the oaken door visitors were expected to enter, in a proper manner, and sign their names in a book kept for the purpose; and be shown round the great grass-plot, and told to look down the well, that had been dried up four hundred years; and requested not to touch the old font, which had been excavated in Sir Richard's own time, and at his own expense. For Sir Richard was a lover of antiquities, and proud of his bits of stone, and accustomed to muse on the good old times, amongst the landmarks left by Cæsar's tag-rag.

As we wound our way up the broad gravel road that led to the entrance-gates, we came upon Sir Richard Freemantle himself, and had been warned of his presence some minutes before, by his voice responding coldly and distinctly to a second voice, more hoarse and guttural, and more vociferous.

There was no intention of listening to the conversation, but there was little chance of evading it, save by leaping a dry ditch which had once communicated with the dry moat that skirted the castle walls. If there had been any wish to keep the discussion secret, their voices would not have rung so loudly in the summer air. It was a mere wrangle about a situation; the stranger applying for one being less courteous and servile than are place-seekers in general.

"Try me agin, Sir Richard, and see what an honest fellow a few good words will make me."

"You have been tried, and found wanting."

"Ah, and so may greater people than I when their time's come, my old woman says—we shall be awful light in the scales when the lot of us are lumped together, she says—baronets and all," he added, with a short laugh.

"Have you anything more to say?"

"I hope I've said enough to remind you how hard I'm druv, Sir Richard?"

"Your own doings—why offer them as an excuse to me?"

"You're a gentleman, and don't understand what druv ing be."

"I have my own idea concerning it."

"And you won't have me?"

"Never again."

"Will you give me a crown—an old servant?"

"I never give money away, on principle."

"It's a damned hard principle, Sir Richard."

"I have found it answer very well. Good day, Ricksworth."

"I should have thought, for my darter's sake——"

"Don't argue any more—there's a good fellow. I am pressed for time, and you weary me. Your daughter is a good servant, a modest girl, and suits my housekeeper, I am told—you should be more a credit to her."

"Luck's agin me—you're agin me too, like all the world, save her, p'raps. She stands by me yet, however much the people about here may tell you and your belongings what a wretch her father is."

"I hear nothing concerning you."

"And will you do nothing for me?"

"Nothing."

"Why not?"

"I have answered;" and Sir Richard Freemantle turned away, and was proceeding towards the castle, when we came in sight of the late speakers—in one of whom, a burly, ill-clad, swarthy-looking ruffian, I recognised the man whom I had seen at the "Haycock Inn." He stared at us, somewhat insolently and defiantly, as we noted

a pantomimic shake of his clenched fist at the back of the baronet.

“Well, *gentlemen*,” he sneered as we came up.

“A fine day, Mr. Ricksworth,” said Grey politely.

“For fine folks,” he added ; “to a scamp like me, all days are about the same, Mr. Grey.”

“What’s wrong this morning, Ricksworth ?”

“I’ve been trying for a living, and that starchy devil yonder won’t give me a chance.”

“You should try London.”

“Oh ! they’re too particular there ; last time I was there they locked me up, and—cut my hair,” he added, with a grin that displayed a set of enormous white tusks ; “p’raps they improved my morals, for I want to earn a penny in an honest manner, and all the doors are slapped in my face, and be cussed to ‘em ! He’s as bad as my own close-fisted brother-in-law—cuss him too, with my compliments !”

“Well, good day,” said Grey, stepping out to rejoin me, who had gone on slowly.

Ricksworth was at his side again. His insolent air had vanished—there was the whine of a professional beggar in his voice.

“You’ve been a good friend to me once or twice, Mr. Grey, though I mayn’t have been the most grateful—if you’d only lend me a bit of silver till Saturday night, when my wife gets in her washing bills.”

“Here’s an odd sixpence,” and it was spun towards him.

“Thank’ee, thank’ee—you won’t say anything about this to the girl up at the gate ; she mayn’t like it, and it makes words.”

“All right.”

“Then good-day to you, and your stiff-necked young friend. And Gord bless you, Mr. Grey—perhaps I can do you a good turn some day. I nusses my goods with my bads—it’s all here !”

And he tapped his villainous forehead as he turned on his heel.

Sir Richard was waiting for us at the gates. His thin bony hand had not yet been extended to ring the bell-handle on his left. As we advanced, he veered suddenly round and

looked intently at me. Grey touched his hat, but he took no notice of the salutation.

"You are late visitors to the castle, gentlemen," he said; "four is the hour at which we generally close the gates."

He rang the bell, and muttered something about his doubts as to whether the gate-keeper had gone home or not. The doubts were speedily dissipated by the door swinging back on its rusty hinges, and by Mercy Ricksworth appearing in the aperture, with not so bright and laughing a face as she had worn at the farm, but with a shade less colour on her cheeks, and a pair of swollen eyelids, as though she had been crying.

"These gentlemen wish to see over the castle," said Sir Richard very courteously, waiting for us to precede him through the gate, an act of deference of which we did not avail ourselves, till he said in his usual cold tones,

"I am not going in yet."

We entered, and Mercy Ricksworth pointed to a bulky volume, placed on an oaken slope affixed to the wall, and offered a pen to William Grey, with a smile that she tried in vain to repress.

"What's the matter, Mercy?" asked Grey, looking hard into her face.

"Nothing."

"Don't tell me nothing—you have been crying."

"Oh! I often cry, Mr. Grey—I've plenty to cry for."

"That father of yours, he——"

"Please don't say anything about *him*," and the girl's face flushed, as she gave an impatient wave of her hands towards the visitors' book; "sign, Sir. It's a rule here to sign."

"I beg your pardon—I hope I haven't——"

Mercy went to the slope, and opened the book with an impetuous hand, whilst Grey stood watching her, and rubbing the back of his ear with the feather of the pen.

"Would you like to sign first?" suggested Grey.

"After you."

"Would you——?"

"For Heaven's sake, look sharp," cried I petulantly; "there's Sir Richard glowering at us through the doorway still."

Grey made a dash at the visitors' book, dipped his pen in the ink-horn affixed to the wall, and commenced writing. An instant afterwards, the little hand of Mercy Ricksworth passed over the paper, and made an ugly smear of his penmanship.

"Hollo!" cried Grey, picking up his pen, which had been knocked out of his hand by Miss Ricksworth's manoeuvre.

"You know I will not have this—that I have said so half a dozen times, Mr. Grey. If you are partial to visiting these ruins, write your proper name, Sir."

"But I *did* write John Jones last time, Mercy."

"You'll never do it again."

"Ah, you are hard upon me, to-day."

And very submissively the son of the silversmith wrote William Grey under the smear, then, giving the pen to me, he walked towards the large grass-plot in the centre. I signed my name beneath Grey's, and then almost unconsciously turned over a leaf or two of the volume. It was a hasty glance, but I saw at least thirty or forty William Greys occurring at regular intervals, and on the last page some ten or twelve Robert Lacklands, written in a small sharp hand, that reminded me of Thirsk's calligraphy, of which I had seen a few specimens.

I followed Grey to the grass-plot.

"I was not aware that you were so constant a lover of the antique, Grey?"

"They're such fine ruins, you see."

"Yes, I see."

I must have responded somewhat drily, for Grey looked nervously, almost eagerly, towards me.

"I have taken to smoking lately, and it's astonishing how a fellow can enjoy a cigar in this quiet old relic of the bygones."

"I fancy that I should grow tired of too many visits, unless there were an attraction not quite so antique to lure me hither."

Grey reddened very much, and cut at the long rank grass with a little walking cane he carried.

"Shall we require the guide?" I inquired.

"No," said Grey; "it's a pity to take her out of her way, and it's a long pull round the ruins, and I know all about

them by heart. I daresay, just where we are standing, many a tournament has been held, Neider."

"Probably."

"For the place wasn't dismantled till Henry the Seventh's time, and then there was a flare-up and a regular siege, and they kept the king so long outside, that, when he did enter, he knocked the place to pieces out of spite. A spiteful beggar, that Henry the Seventh."

"Yes."

"What are you looking at now?" he inquired, a little irritably.

"I am wondering what possible interest Sir Richard Freemantle can take in our signatures."

"He's a curious mortal, I believe. Come on."

Turning my back on the baronet, who was standing before the visitors' book, studying its open pages, with Mercy at his side, carelessly swinging a key on her little finger, I accompanied Grey round the ruins.

There was little else save the mere shell of what had once been a noble pile of architecture—here and there the towers were more perfect, and at the extremity of the castle still remained a mass of crumbling stone-work, by which one could see the size and altitude of the rooms that had been there once upon a time.

"The people learned in these ruins say this part of the place was built many centuries later by a Norman baron," said Grey,—"at all events, it's in a fair state of preservation. Do you see the timbers in the wall still?"

"Yes."

"Do you see that staircase breaking out of a hole in the wall, thirty feet high?—that was a secret passage to a secret room, where prisoners and papers were stowed till both grew musty. I went up there once myself."

"How did you manage that foolhardy exploit?" I inquired.

"By groping along a musty kind of drain on my hands and knees to the left here—somewhere here, but it's nearly choked up with leaves now—till I came to the steps built inside the wall, and so up to that hole, where the grass looks like a shock head of hair. I was rather nervous when I felt the steps shaking under my feet—but old Ricksworth

dared me, and his daughter was laughing—and so up I went."

"To please an old ruffian and his coquettish daughter."

"She isn't coquettish!" cried Grey, warmly—"there isn't a better-hearted girl in the world. Oh! Neider, you should have seen her turn as white as a sheet when I clambered to that slit in the wall. It was worth all the trouble."

"That is a matter of opinion," said I. "I shouldn't care to risk my neck without a fair object in prospective."

"It's not so very dangerous. Old Ricksworth used to do it when he was my age, he tells me."

"Don't believe all that you are told."

"And Sir Richard went up there once."

"Sir Richard!" I exclaimed.

"Oh! he'll go anywhere for a bit of an old brick, or a choice specimen of Roman cement. He gave a lecture at the town-hall last year on some quart pots and a bad sixpence that were dug out of My Lady's Chamber—this is My Lady's Chamber."

"Oh! is it?"

"You look tired," said Grey. "I'm boring you."

"Not at all," I responded. "I was only thinking what a strange lady's chamber it is now, and trying to people it with the lady and *her* ladies-in-waiting, and the silken-clad pages, and the eternal greyhound basking in the great fire that once burned here."

"You are imaginative, Mr. Neider," said a voice behind me; and both of us, turning round, beheld Sir Richard Freemantle at our side.

"I have been, Sir Richard," I replied, taken a little aback by his sudden address.

"It is a gift for which to be grateful—sometimes I wish my own brain was not so dusty, or hard, or matter-of-fact. Could I speak to you alone a moment?"

"Certainly."

Sir Richard looked hard at Mr. Grey, who took the hint and departed, with a puzzled expression of countenance.

"You are the Mr. Neider who signed his name in the visitors' book this afternoon?"

"The same, Sir."

“ And a friend of Mr. Thirsk’s ? ”

“ I am a fellow-pupil with him at Mr. Genny’s farm.”

“ Not a friend ? ” he repeated.

“ As the term goes, probably I am his friend. I take an interest in him ; I am very frequently his companion.”

“ You were with him at church one Sunday, when he did not expect to see me.”

“ I was with him at church, Sir Richard.”

“ He has not attended church since. I presume that he is still at Follingay farm ? ”

I answered in the affirmative.

Sir Richard scratched some hieroglyphics amongst the grass and bits of stones at his feet, and glanced at me askance.

“ You and I are strangers. I cannot expect you to answer every question with which I may trouble you.”

“ Hardly, Sir.”

“ Still, I would ask, leaving you to reply or not, as you may think fit, has Mr. Thirsk spoken of me as his enemy—his implacable and inveterate enemy ? ”

I did not answer.

“ I will not press—I have no right to press the question,” he said ; “ but I am an honourable man, who has a right to defend his own actions. All my life I have given Nicholas Thirsk the best advice.”

“ Mr. Thirsk has but once spoken of you, Sir Richard,” I answered, “ and in the heat of passion, when a fair judgment was not anticipated.”

“ It is an evasive answer,” said he, quietly ; “ but it will do.”

I felt my face flush, and a response, somewhat satirical and stinging, rise to my lips ; but the man was in earnest, and he had a right to defend his good name. He was a persevering man also, and not inclined to drop the subject, or my company.

“ I have always given him the best advice,” he said again, “ and he has always turned from me with a taunt or a curse—the way of the world, and nothing to distress me, possibly.”

“ It depends whether Mr. Thirsk’s welfare is a matter of importance to you or not.”

"His welfare is nothing to me now ; the welfare of those likely to be influenced by his actions is everything—*everything*," he repeated with great emphasis.

He scratched amongst the stones again, and remained so long silent, that, with a slight elevation of my hat, I was turning to depart, when he said hastily—

"Don't go, Mr. Neider, just this moment."

I waited for his further cross-examination, resolving in my mind the best method of implying that such a series of questions was objectionable.

"Mr. Neider," he said at last, as if he were divining my thoughts, "I wish you to inform Mr. Thirsk that I have met you and asked these questions. I have no occasion to play the spy," he added, with no little *hauteur*.

"You relieve my mind, Sir."

"Tell Mr. Thirsk, if you please, also, that if he has come to Welsdon with any motive foreign to that which is apparent to you and his friends, that such a motive must inevitably fail. I do not fear his power or his scheming, but I object to his persistence—his annoyance. May I ask this favour of you ?"

"You may, Sir ; Mr. Thirsk shall be apprised of your communication."

He regarded me very attentively for some moments.

"Yours is a frank face ; it is strange that that misguided young man—ever his own enemy—should have chosen you for a friend, perhaps a confidant ?"

"I am not his confidante, Sir Richard."

"There will come a time—there must—when his rash schemes will recoil upon himself, and his fine castle in the air be as much a ruin as the walls that now surround us."

He muttered this to himself rather than to me, and, with a "good-morning," I left the baronet amongst the ruins he was gazing at.

Years afterwards, when schemes had recoiled upon the busy brains that framed them, and schemes that had been successful had turned to dust and ashes, I stood in the ruins of My Lady's Chamber with Sir Richard Freemantle. What a different scene to that time, and what an end and moral to all scheming, and what a change in all of us !

## CHAPTER II.

## MATTERS TENDER.

I FOUND William Grey standing under the gateway, in earnest discourse with Mercy Ricksworth. An animated discourse, that heightened the colour on his cheeks, and whitened the young portress's.

"Don't come again, Mr. Grey—I would rather you would not come so often here."

"But, Mercy——"

She turned to me as I came up, and asked a little impetuously,

"Has Sir Richard been speaking of me, or of any—of any one who comes here, Mr. Neider?"

"Sir Richard has not alluded once to the present company, Miss Ricksworth."

She regarded me with a doubtful expression for an instant, then she said,

"I can believe you—I can believe you!"

"Upon my word, I am very much obliged to you."

Hers was an April nature, that a word might influence—she gave a merry laugh at my response.

"You don't look a sly young man, like —" she paused, and coloured, and laughed again.

I felt inclined to be quite proud of my countenance—which, by-the-way, I had long had an idea verged a trifle too close on the platter species—Sir Richard had plainly owned, and the portress had indirectly confessed, that mine was a face that fairly told its story. Surely I had a right to be conceited on a matter which concerned me so deeply.

After bidding Mercy Ricksworth good-day, I stood hesitating at the gate, which she held open for me. It was usual on these occasions to reward the custodian of antiquities; but she was the niece of the man whom I served, and occasionally visited the farm as a guest. Still she was poor, perhaps the support of her father, and my fingers strayed in the direction of my waistcoat pocket.

"Pray don't, Mr. Neider," she said colouring again. "I

would rather not, if you please. I haven't shown you over the ruins, and I—I do not mean to take your money."

She looked very decisive, and I did not press the point. With a good-day, I took my departure over the little bridge that spanned the deep, dry moat, and joined William Grey, standing in a disconsolate attitude amidst the long grass by the high road.

"Come on—what a time you have been!" he said, irritably.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting!"

"Umph!"

"What's the matter, Grey?"

"Oh, nothing! Nothing more the matter with me than there ever has been, than there ever will be. Drop the subject!"

"Dropped accordingly."

"What a confounded dry, heavy-headed fellow you are!" he said, indignantly; "there's no life in you yet. Ah! my fine fellow, wait till you're full blown!"

I burst into a hearty laugh at this. His fierce looks could not check my hilarity, and finally he softened and laughed heartily also.

"There will come a time, Alf Neider," he cried, "when the German stoic will melt, and the 'sensations' be a little too much for you. Wait till you are as old as I am."

"Till that time, O Nestor, leave me in the enjoyment of my sober senses."

"Neider, you won't tell *that* Thirsk?" he asked, very suddenly.

"I'm not aware that I have anything to tell him."

"No, but you will have," he said. "I'm going to make you my father confessor, old boy. I can't keep bursting with my secrets any longer."

"Oh!—more secrets!"

"You're the world," said he. "I look upon you as the hard world, listening to the romance and fancy of the fool whose wise teeth have been cut, and left him as silly as ever. I own I'm silly, you know."

"But you are not."

"What am I, then?"

"One of the best-hearted fellows under the sun—possibly

with a heart a trifle too big for the sceptical world which is about to listen to your maunderings."

"Complimentary and uncomplimentary, and all in a lump," said he ; "but now to business."

"Ye—es."

He linked his arm with mine, and began walking at a headlong pace, against which I was compelled to remonstrate, that sultry afternoon.

"Only to get the steam up," explained Grey ; "now, are you ready ?"

"Quite ready"

"And prepared for anything ?"

"Yes."

"I'm in love with Mercy Ricksworth !"

He stared hard into my face to watch the result of that revelation, of which I had had my suspicions long since, and was then fully prepared for.

"Well, aren't you surprised ?"

"Not very."

"Isn't it an awful idea, calculated to disgrace me in the eyes of my family, afford me a chance of a disinheritance, throw me into an ignoble sphere, and pester me with illiterate relations ? I put this to you, for you are the world, that knows not what sentiment means."

"It is an illusion—and naturally will come to nothing."

"Not if I can help it."

"Your thoughts will change—your——"

"Neider, I never change !"

And Grey turned to me with a firmness, a hardness on his countenance, that reminded me of Nicholas Thirsk.

"I don't lay claim," he continued, "to be a man of very grand ideas—I am humble in my notions. I don't know what pride means ; I can understand where the greatest happiness of my life is to be found—and where it will assuredly be lost."

"You're a little romantic, Grey—that's all."

"I was never romantic," he replied. "I have always been cool, and easy, and matter-of-fact. I haven't dashed at this idea ; it is not the result of a perusal of a hundred or two trashy novels ; it's a sober conviction that Mercy Ricksworth's a good girl, and would make me a good wife."

“But——”

“Wait a moment ; I shall have finished soon,” said he ; “you’ll spare me your ‘buts’ till the play’s over, and we have rung down the green curtain.”

“That’s only fair, Grey.”

“I don’t want a stuck-up, fine lady for a farmer’s wife, to begin with—I shall be content with a virtuous, pretty, light-hearted companion, to brighten my home, and lighten a heart which is not very difficult to gladden at any time. I don’t want a woman with money ; for the money is thrown in your teeth once in twenty-four hours ; never a blessing—generally a taunt. Mercy Ricksworth is a girl I can love—she is not illiterate—she has even a claim to be a heroine.”

“Indeed !”

“She struggles hard for her father ; hopes against hope to see him less of a scamp and a black sheep ; tries to counteract her mother’s *rasping* way of making a convert of old Ricksworth ; fights upwards amidst the shadowy life in which her lot is cast, and from which, please God, I will stretch a hand to save her.”

“Or share the shadows with her.”

“Better with her than in the sunshine without her,” said Grey, sturdily ; “although I look forward to a life of sunshine, if ever I am lucky enough to induce her to say ‘Yes.’ Her father will be no clog to me—his own wild love for his child will keep him away”

“Doubtful.”

“It keeps him away from the Hall : a word of Mercy’s has more influence over him than you can possibly imagine. There is no rock ahead, take my word for it, Neider.”

“And your own family ?”

“I’m a sample,” he said, laughing ; “we’re all the same pattern. Easy-going, unambitious folk, who will take my view of the case when the first astonishment is recovered from—and wish me joy, and shake me heartily by the hands, and be only curious to know what the future bride is like.”

“A family of which you should feel proud to be a member.”

“Well,” he said reflectively, “I am.”

“I am flattered by your confidence, Grey,” I said ; “what I, the stern world, think of the case is another matter.

Looking at it soberly, I can see that it is an unwise step ; speaking as a friend, I would warn you not to make it."

"What, after all my explanations!" he said, a little reproachfully.

"I think you might do better."

"And don't you think me a fool for taking you into my confidence?" he cried.

"No, I think you a friend—one whose frank nature I haven't half appreciated."

"Thank you—thank you."

"But," I added, "I am sorry to hear the story. You should have been the hero of a fairer one."

"But if I am content?"

"With the present—what of the future, Grey?"

"I don't fear it. I can meet it," he said, boldly.

"And the girl, Mercy Ricksworth—is she aware of the state of your affections?"

"I hope so ; I think she must be," he said very quickly ; "she's not a dull girl, and I haven't used any great effort to disguise my feelings. She's a girl who can make any man happy ; on her virtue, courage, faith, I stake my honour."

"There is no doubt of her accepting you, I think."

"Ah ! but there is," said he ; "she's plaguy firm at times, and only to-day she has told me that I must not come any more—that people will talk—that Sir Richard has already objected to the frequent occurrence of my name in the visitors' book. She thought that you and Sir Richard were arguing the point, and she's very tenacious concerning her name. But I have hope."

"Well, I wish you luck, Grey. Accept my best wishes—if they're worth anything—for a happy issue to your love-venture. May your life be as fair as it deserves to be."

"You're a friend."

"I hope so."

"A friend for life, I mean," said Grey. "I have said once before that I never change."

And he never did change. In sickness and in health, in the midst of his own troubles and of mine, he was ever the true friend. He shakes me by the hand still—his honest English face is looking into mine !

## CHAPTER III.

## I DELIVER SIR RICHARD'S MESSAGE.

I SAW Thirsk late on the evening of that day. We had played whist after supper, in the farm parlour ; Mr. Genny and Grey against Nicholas Thirsk and me. A shrewd, careful old whist-player was farmer Genny—a Deschapelles, born to blush unseen in the desert air of Welsdon in the Woods. He knew every card in one's hand before the careless owner was aware of it himself, and as a matter of course, turned many honest sixpences into the depths of his capacious pockets.

Genny was always good-tempered over his whist—people who win at cards are generally in most excellent spirits—and we all went to our respective rooms on amicable terms with ourselves and general society. Thirsk had been in his best vein, and his humorous sallies had elicited from us many a hearty English laugh, that made the place ring again. Harriet Genny, watching us from a distance over a pile of her uncle's ungainly socks, broke into little laughs over her work, despite her effort to preserve an equable demeanour. For Nicholas Thirsk, gentleman or farm-pupil, had been never a favourite of hers.

At the doors of our rooms, I said—

“Can I have a word or two with you to-night, Thirsk ?”

“Eh ?—what's in the wind, Neider ?”

“I have only to relate a little incident which occurred to me this morning.”

“Where ?”

“In the ruins of Welsdon Castle.”

“Come in !—what is it ?”

He almost dragged me into his room, and somewhat uncourteously shut William Grey out on the landing. He looked excited, too, and certainly prepared for worse news than that which I had to communicate.

“Now, then—pile up the agony, Neider !”

“There's not a great deal of agony to pile.”

“Go on !” he said, with feverish impatience.

"The fact is, I met Sir Richard Freemantle in the ruins."

"What did *you* want at the ruins?"

"To see if the right of inspection was as open to me as to you."

"Well?"

"And Sir Richard Freemantle was there."

"He's always there, pottering over his bits of brick and ugly relics of a past in which all his interest and affection lie buried—the mole!"

"And he accosted me. He remembered my face on that Sunday when you made your first and last appearance at Welsdon church."

"The devil doubt his memory!"

"And he spoke of *you*."

"And told *you* I was all that was bad," he added, quickly.

"No."

"Odd that—do explain, Neider, and not jerk out every word as if it was a pain to *you*. Now, then!"

"Sir Richard merely sought to defend his own character, which he thought you might have possibly exhibited to me, perhaps to others, in a sinister light. He added, by way of conclusion, that you had misjudged him all your life; and that if any motive foreign to that which is ostensibly apparent to the world has led you to this neighbourhood, it must inevitably fail."

"Don't the Scriptures tell us to beware of false prophets?" cried Thirsk, mockingly.

"Is there any occasion to bring the Scriptures in question?"

"Oh! you're a bit of a saint—I forgot. You read your Bible of an evening, after honest folk are in their beds."

"I wish you did!"

"It might have turned me out a saint, too. *N'importe*, the world is big enough for saints and sinners; and Fortune is an impartial goddess, who showers her prizes in the midst of us indiscriminately. In your hands there will fall nothing but blanks."

"Quite sure?"

"Quite."

“May I ask what you mean ?”

“Only what I say—remember it in the day when you throw for the prize on which your heart is built.”

“And in your case, Thirsk ?”

“Oh ! a rich prize, that will set me up in the world, and bring all the old friends back—remember that, too.”

“I will do my best to remember your prophecies.”

“As for Sir Richard Freemantle—that for his baronetship !” and he snapped his fingers in the air.

“Good-night, Thirsk.”

“Wait a moment. It is not often that I get a chance of a palaver with you—my only friend for the nonce, and not a bad sort, as I hope, and believe. What do you think of Sir Richard ?”

“I have not thought a great deal about him.”

“Isn’t he a proud, stiff-backed fool, with his heart in his ruins, like a fossil in the rock ?”

“I should say there are some good points about him—but I do not profess to be a judge of character.”

“Lucky for you. And so good-night to you, Neider, and peace to your manes.”

He extended his hand to me, and when mine was within it, he shook it warmly, and muttered something that I did not catch. I was on the landing, when he called “Neider !”

Entering his room again, he met me with a face strangely excited and dark.

“No matter—good-night to you again. That’s all.”

“You are sure it is all ?”

“I thought for a moment that the time had come to tell you my story ; but the waters bear me away again, and the evil of to-day is sufficient to dwell on. I thought I might have ventured to ask your advice—I who never took to advice in my life, and who turn from it now, proud of my own strength and stubbornness ! Don’t you hear me say good-night ?” he cried, with an impetuous stamp of his foot.

“Good-night, Thirsk,” and I left him a second time, and repaired to my room, leaving the door ajar, lest his fitful nature should prompt him to make a third recall.

I had a dreamy idea that my advice might be of service ;

that his mind was disturbing and deluding him, and that with plain common sense to view the question before him, many doubts might be resolved, and much sober prudence inculcated. I was an egotist then, and vain of my phlegmatic nature—that German stolidity which my father had bequeathed me with his farm.

That German stolidity!

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## CHAPTER IV.

### MY OWN STORY

I APPROACH matters personal. I have dallied with them until now, but the current is too strong for me, and must bear me for awhile to the surface of this tale. Was it here in which my story began, or at some little distance, when I passed it by, and strove to be an idler on the banks? Surely not here, even not there—mayhap on the night I burned my day-dreams in Farmer Genny's kitchen. It is difficult, it is even impossible to fix the date—it has none. Looking back, and writing soberly here at my desk, I cannot say when that story took its rise—the mists are over its beginning.

That there was a story, new and strange to me, in which I had to play my part, and see others take there stand therein I knew too well.

When Nicholas Thirsk paused in the promptings of an impulsive nature, and drew the cloak of his selfism tighter round him, I did not doubt it. I might have guessed it, known it before, albeit I kept my secret to myself, and strove to think of other matters.

It was in that striving that I fairly awakened to all which was before me.

The nights were drawing in, the lights were on the table, and I had just completed a second letter to my mother, when Harriet Genny entered the farm parlour.

“Where is my uncle—and the others?” she asked.

“They are together in the village, I believe. Mr. Genny is giving them a practical lesson in horse-buying.”

"Ah! I had forgotten. And why are you not receiving your share of the lesson?"

"I am somewhat tired," I replied, shrinking a little from the searching look in her hazel eyes.

"Are you writing to your mother?"

"Yes, Miss Genny."

"A true mother's son," she remarked; "it is pleasant to see absent friends not entirely forgotten."

"They never are by those who are worthy of a thought."

"Which you are."

"Oh! of course," I responded, with a laugh.

"How I do detest those short, unmeaning laughs of yours," she said with her customary abruptness; "they're not natural, and they deceive nobody."

"I was not attempting deceit."

"You would think it a rude question, Mr. Neider, if I were to ask you the tenor of that letter to your mother?"

"I would think it a curious question from anyone, save Miss Genny."

"Thank you for the compliment; and why not curious from Miss Genny?"

She had taken her seat near the fireside—the first fire of the season—and was busy at those eternal socks, from which her uncle stumped so many heels away.

"From anyone else I should think the question arose from mere curiosity—I am very certain that you are above that."

"Don't be quite certain," she said, saucily.

She was in good spirits that evening, and less abrupt in her manner than usual. Here and there a flash of that brusqueness that might be natural to her, brought up amidst brusque people; but still more gentle and womanly that night, and looking, with that smile upon her face, so young and bright, and fit for better things!

"I was always an inquisitive girl, and womanhood has not outgrown curiosity."

"Then I will satisfy your curiosity, if you will allow me."

I arose and offered her the four closely written sheets of minor news, which I concocted for my mother's amusement in the lonely farm in Cumberland.

She reddened as I advanced, and thrust the letter smartly aside.

"No ; not so curious as that, Sir," she said, indignantly ; "I asked for the tenor of it, not the letter itself."

"News of no very great importance, then, Miss Genny," I explained ; "the old story of my farming life—how rapidly I improve under Mr. Genny's tuition, and how farming agrees with me, and leaves me nothing to wish for."

"Say that again."

I said it with a heightened colour—she kept her thoughtful eyes fixed so steadily upon me.

"And it is all untrue, Mr. Neider," she said, after my second assertion ; "white lies, to deceive a faithful mother, who could bear the truth just as well. Why do you men ever treat us women as children, with whom it is not judicious to place implicit confidence ?"

"How do you know all this is untrue, Miss Genny ?" I asked ; "what possible motive could I have in conveying a false impression of my state of mind ?"

"Love for your mother—a worthy passion, that might have shown itself in a different manner, and no harm done."

"Is there harm done now ?"

"There will come a bitter disappointment to that mother some day."

"Pray explain."

"Farming does not agree with you ; you do *not* rapidly improve ; there is at the bottom of your heart more to wish for now than ever there was in your life."

I did not answer—I felt that it was all true, though I had hoped to deceive myself into a new belief. This young woman, only two years my senior, read me like a book.

"Do you deny it, Mr. Neider ?"

"I neither own it nor deny it, Miss Genny," I replied ; "you startle me from my own convictions by your earnestness—by your belief in these assertions."

There was a pause ; then I said,

"Will you tell me on what foundation you base your convictions of my duplicity ?"

"Duplicity is a hard word."

"Let it remain," I replied.

"Then go back to your desk. You fidget me dreadfully standing there so black and angry."

"Upon my word, Miss Genny, I'm not angry."

"Looks go for nothing, as well as words, I see."

I flung myself back in my chair, and waited for this shrewd woman's reasons. I had worn my disguise well, and yet she had seen deeper into my heart than I had dared to fathom for myself; into the dark recesses of that mystery I had not cared to pierce. I was deceiving myself, until her words aroused me.

"I see you thoughtful—even absent. To much of my uncle's teaching I am convinced you have turned a deaf ear; you do not look forward to your Cumberland farm with much pleasurable anticipation."

"There may be other reasons for that," I said.

There were, and she might never know them. Looking at her then, an earnest woman who loved truth, I could believe it.

"Light ones—let them pass."

"Light or heavy, let them pass now, Miss Genny."

"I should have lived twenty-two years in vain, if I were not able to read a little of my fellow-creatures' motives. I do not set myself up for a woman more clear-sighted than the rest of my sex—anyone in my place, interested in you, must have seen the same."

"Will you let me thank you for that interest?" I said, suddenly. "It is kind, it is—"

"Spare me your thanks. I am interested in everything living and breathing the same atmosphere with me—even in the canary swinging aloft there in his cage by the window."

This allusion to a feathered favourite of hers in the same breath with myself nettled me. It was odd that we were never long together without a skirmish of words.

"I wonder whether *he* is tired of farming life, disguising his thoughts, deceiving his mother, and inclined to be absent in mind."

"You can't discourse any great while without a taunt, Mr. Neider," said she, rising; "I have told you before that you resemble Mr. Thirsk."

"I have done with my taunts, as you term them, Miss Genny. Don't go."

“ I have nothing more to say—at least not a great deal.”

“ Pray be seated.”

“ No,” she added, shortly.

I folded my letter, and placed it in the envelope; she stood by the mantelpiece, watching the operation.

“ You intend to send that false letter, then ? ”

“ I have never acknowledged to its falsity.”

“ If I dared not own that my present life was distasteful, and my companions unsuitable, I would, at least, suppress a glowing account that must deceive a gentle mother.”

I turned the envelope over and over in my hands.

“ Your mother must see the truth one day—the folly of that stupid promise made in a thoughtless moment. Mr. Neider, I would tell her my purposed life was a mistake.”

“ I am not so sure of that.”

“ You are not happy.”

“ The life before me in the Vale of St. John does not fill me with very great dismay—did it convulse me with horror, I have promised.”

“ For your mother’s sake—and your mother may not wish it.”

“ Leave it to time.”

“ You will never make a farmer; you will never earn a penny by your calling.”

“ Haven’t I sufficient brains ? ”

“ No.”

“ Ah ! that shows how mistaken even clever women can be ! ”

I was sorry for this remark an instant afterwards—she changed so suddenly.

“ I shall never talk of your future again.”

“ Don’t say that ! ”

“ I shall leave you to — ”

“ Don’t say that ! ” I shouted, with a vehemence that made her jump again, and frightened the canary off his perch; “ I’m only unsettled and hasty, and foolish words will escape me. You must speak of my future—I am an egotist, and love to talk of myself. See here.”

I rose, went to the fire, and dropped the letter into the flames.

“ It was a false missive—I own it.”

“ I knew it ! ”

“ I will write plainly and simply the history of my progress,” I said ; “ nothing extenuate, or set down aught in malice.’ Are we friends ? ”

“ Certainly.”

“ Well, shake hands upon it, Miss Genny.”

“ There’s no occasion.”

“ I shan’t believe I am forgiven for all my harsh words, if you don’t shake hands,” said I ; “ why, your forehead is furrowed now ”

“ I’m not thinking of *you*,” she answered with a trifle more abruptness than usual.

“ Will you shake hands ? ”

“ If it is any satisfaction to you—there ! ”

She placed her hand in mine for an instant ; for an instant her thoughtful eyes were looking into mine, and my heart gave three or four sudden thumps that were unaccountable. I could have held her hand in mine an hour, and it was only its hasty withdrawal that brought me to myself.

“ Are you going now ? ”

“ Yes ; haven’t I been here long enough ? ”

She went straight from the room, and left me staring into the fire, and thinking of—oh ! so many things ! Of that which was ; of that which might be in the bright time that dazed me then to dwell on. I knew then, or rather confessed then, for the first time, that I was thinking too much of Harriet Genny.

She had been in the midst of many thoughts which I have penned down in former chapters of this history—she had been there *despite my will*. I had seen her every day for many weeks ; my position in the farm-house brought me every day in contact with her ; I had seen her, conversed with her, and yet shut my eyes to that which might have been expected.

For she was a woman in whom one must perforce take interest ; earnest and straightforward—a woman who had seen some sorrows in her life, or met with some trial or disappointment that had shadowed it before its time. A young woman as out of place in her present position as

I might be in that future farm buried amidst the still life of the Cumberland fells. One born for better things, well-educated, clever, and clear-sighted, whose natural amiability had been spoilt by much constraint, and an utter lack of sympathy with her and her ideas.

In her fits of petulance, her hasty exclamations against all which was narrow-minded or false, there were the attributes of a nature that despised deceit, and was quick to express a disapprobation of it. Casual observers would have set her down for an ill-tempered girl ; those who had time to study her could not long be ignorant of the sterling metal lying beneath the surface.

Harriet Genny, if possible, was a trifle more terse and monosyllabic after that last conference than heretofore ; even evaded me, as though a spark from the fire that had begun in my heart had flickered forth during that interview and betrayed me. It was a strange reserve which troubled me ; I felt that if she were aware of my growing feelings towards her, and desired to check them, she was adopting the right course ; and such an adoption pained and worried me.

From the distance that suddenly sprung up between us, one might have imagined a serious quarrel had occurred, and I used my best endeavours to bridge over the gulf that seemed widening between us.

It was a week before the opportunity presented itself to speak again. On a Sunday afternoon this was, when Uncle Genny, tired out by the second long sermon to which he had been an auditor that day, sat and slept in his arm-chair by the fire, with a pocket-handkerchief as big as a tray-cloth spread over his head and shoulders, *à la Blondin* in the sack movement.

Mr. Grey had gone for a stroll, Mr. Thirsk was in his own room, and Harriet Genny had set aside a religious work she had been endeavouring to read by the firelight.

“ Miss Genny, I wish to ask you a question,” I said, in a low voice.

“ What is it ? ”

She spoke in a louder tone than was necessary, as if to protest against any idea of a secret conference. I glanced nervously at her uncle, whose disjointed snore was sweet melody in my ears just then.

“Have I offended you in any way?”

“What made you think that?” was her counter-query.

“You are different in your manner towards me—you have lost all interest in that future of mine which I flattered myself concerned you once a little.”

“Oh! no.”

“Still, you are offended.”

Unconsciously she lowered her voice a little.

“If I were offended, Mr. Neider, I should show it in a different manner,” she said; “but I have had no cause to take offence.”

“You are different—you will pardon me, but there is a something new and strange in your manner, which perplexes me.”

“You are always full of fancies.”

“Do you deny a change, then?”

“I may be a trifle more thoughtful—I have reason to be always dull at this time of the year. If I am changed, don’t think for an instant that it is any word or act of yours that has originated my new mood.”

“I shall be glad to think otherwise.”

“You must consider yourself a very important personage,” she said, pursing her red lips, as though striving to keep down a smile that wished to force its way there.

“On the contrary, a very insignificant atom to float here and there for a few months, and then be puffed to another sphere, with no one to miss or regret its departure.”

“An acrid comment, that is possibly thrown out as a bait for a compliment, Mr. Neider.”

“I detest compliments!”

“Sensible man!”

“Miss Genny, do you believe for an instant that there will be a soul in this great farm—even Nero—who will not be as happy after my departure as before my existence was dreamt of?”

“Iппs may feel it a little, if you fee him well.”

“Miss Genny, you——”

“Uncle, is it not time for tea, do you think?” she interrupted; and this appeal, in a clear ringing voice, gave her uncle a start, and brought down the voluminous handkerchief into his lap.

"Ay ! lass—I doan't mind if I do, now."

"It is getting late."

"And there's another bout at church, to knock through, before there be a chance of Monday morning. Haugh !" and Mr. Genny yawned, stretched out his arms and legs, and rubbed his eyes with his knuckles, like a great school-boy.

"You are always thinking of Monday morning, uncle, on a Sabbath day," said Harriet, half reproachfully.

"Ay !—not that Sunday be a bad day in its way, Harriet, my dear," said he, "for it gives a man a moighty long toime to think what is good for him. But the crops will run in my head somehow, though I go to church three toimes on a Sunday, as befits a man loike myself, who be so well known in the parish. Let's have tea, lass."

Harriet turned away to give her orders to the farm servants, and her uncle watched her departure from the room.

"I can't make that girl out lately," he said, half aloud ; "she ain't happy."

"Not happy, Mr. Genny ?" I said, quickly.

"Ay !—are ye there, Mr. Neider ? I didn't see ye, now the fire's burnt red loike, or I moight have kept my tongue to myself—which is the proper way to get on in the world, if ye have your eyes open at the same time, moind ye. Noa—I doan't believe she's happy."

"I don't detect much difference in her."

"Ye do a little, then ?"

"I have had my fancies—nothing more than fancies."

"Rum things for a farmer to have in stock," said he ; then he added, drily, "moine ain't fancies."

"Oh !"

"Foive years ago she was a different girl—more loike her cousin Mercy, only not inclined to giggle and cry so much in a breath—sharp as a needle, and as quick with an answer—ah ! as I am," he concluded, egotistically.

"She is as quick as ever then ?"

"Ay ;" and then, after looking at me under his hand, which he placed pent-house fashion over his eyes ; "and has she been giving ye a word of a sort, my lad ?"

"Oh, no !"

"She be astonishingly quick with an answer : it roons in

the Genny family," chuckled the farmer ; "but darm it, she's not what she used to be."

"It's rather dull for her here."

"She'll be married some day."

"Eh?"

"She'll be married some day, I take it. What's to becom of Follingay farm then, unless I marry some one myself, I doan't see very clearly."

"Is there any——"

"But Harriet Genny's re-appearance cut short my important question ; and Mr. Genny, to conceal his embarrassment at having been caught, stirred the fire and said, 'Ay,' for no just cause or reason that could possibly be detected.

Returning from church that evening—Harriet Genny by my side, to my own small astonishment, and Mr. Grey and the farmer a little way in advance—the farmer's niece said suddenly—

"You and my uncle were speaking of me this afternoon?"

"Do you wish me to betray confidence?"

"It was not confidence between you."

"Well, it was a curious topic, concerning your future marriage."

"He—he alluded to that!" she cried.

"Yes. You are trembling, Miss Genny—what's the matter?"

"Go on—what more did he say? I have a right to know this, Mr. Neider; I must and will know it! What more did he say to you about *this*?"

"Nothing."

"You are prevaricating."

"Indeed, I am not."

"You were asking a question of my uncle when I came in—what was it?"

"Upon my word, Miss Genny, I——"

She made two hasty steps away from me, whether to seize her uncle by the collar or not, and demand an answer from him on the spot, it is difficult to determine. I was at her side to explain.

"1—I was about to ask if he believed that there was any

one existent in the world to make his assertion anything more than supposition."

"Is it any business of yours?"

"No, Miss Genny—no business of mine!"

"Then—"

She paused, hesitated, never completed her sentence. After a moment she spoke again, in a tone strangely altered, and with a voice that I thought faltered a little.

"I have an objection to be talked about, Mr. Neider," she said; "and the subject was one concerning which neither of you had a right to speak. He is a good uncle, to whom I owe much, but not always too considerate. You are the friend of a day, and too—inquisitive. Let it content you to know that—in all probability, I shall never marry."

"A rash assertion," I said, in a hoarse voice.

"Why don't you add the satirist's remark, that all women say the same thing?"

"I am not in a satirist's mood."

"You are very taciturn this evening."

"I am the friend of a day, without a right to express an opinion."

"Ah! you treasure my words!"

"Cruel and kind ones—both."

"Sir!"

"Pardon me, I am a dreamer—I am walking in my sleep to-night."

"Mind the stile here, then, or you'll wake to bruises and destruction."

She said it lightly, but how my heart leaped! It was as if from the tones of my voice she knew that she had pained me, and knew—yes, knew!—that a few words spoken in a different manner would be sufficient atonement for her harshness.

I crossed the stile, and held out my hand to assist her. When she was by my side, I drew her gloved hand on my arm.

"It is dark across the fields to-night—do you mind very much my escort, Miss Harriet?"

She did not answer the question, but she let her hand rest upon my arm across the fields towards her uncle's farm. And it was bright as noonday, with the full moon shining

down on us, and Grey and Genny twenty yards in advance.

An indifferent conversation enough between us, concerning the sermon of the evening, the paucity of the congregation, the mistake the organist made in the second hymn, and how it threw the Sunday-school out, the fine weather that lingered with us still and kept the leaves from falling. But it was a happy time, and her voice was low and musical, and thrilled me! Was it dreamland still in which I walked, and she an angel born of it?—I could have walked on all my life, and never cared to wake!

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## CHAPTER V

### A DISAPPOINTMENT.

“THIS be a bit of a game that I can’t exactly make oot,” said Mr. Genny, the next morning; “Mr. Neider—Ipps, look here!”

I had been lingering at the porch in the hope of seeing Harriet Genny before I left the farm-house—Ipps was trotting to and fro, from the dairy to the farm-yard, with the agility of a youth of twenty.

We both approached Mr. Genny, who was standing on the patch of gravel between the farm-house and the white palings skirting the road, deeply interested in certain signs at his feet.

“What do you make of them?”

“They look like footprints surely,” said Ipps.

“Darn it!—they are footprints, aren’t they?”

“Wull—I should say so.”

“And what do ye say, Mr. Neider?”

“I agree with you, Sir.”

“It rained in the noight, and the gravel was soft, and whoever took the trouble to walk up and down here sank in a troifle,” said Genny, nibbling the horn handle of his whip; “there be thieves aboot, I reckon.”

“Aren’t heard of auy,” said Ipps.

“Ye’re getting old and daft, my man,” said Genny, con-

temptuously, "or ye who are first up to see after the horses moight have found something else aboot. And that Nero is old and daft too, I reckon—unless—unless—ay!"

And a bright thought having occurred to Mr. Genny, he relapsed into silence.

"I can't make it oot," he said, after a few moments' intent reverie; "it's a botheration, which'll coom right if I leave it alone, mayhap. I think we'll thrash this morning, Mr. Neider. Wheat's rising moighty fast in London."

Mr. Genny alluded no more to his perplexities; in fact, his sudden change to matters foreign to that subject for which he had summoned me and Ipps to his side, was somewhat remarkable.

When his back was turned, I examined the footprints myself, and was not a little surprised to see no traces under the parlour window, above which was the sleeping chamber of Mr. Thirsk.

"What may be your 'pinion now, Measter Neider?" suggested Ipps.

"I reserve my opinion, Ipps."

"Wull, then, I'll reserve moine," he said, with a laugh—"although I have my own idea."

"Oh! have you?"

"That it's beggars or gipsies," he said, forgetting his reservation—"there's a plaguy soight of 'em aboot just now,—and they have been looking here for a stray goose or so. Now, I think on it, the dog did bark aboot three."

"I didn't hear him."

"He was cutting roond the front of the house, then. I hope he bit a piece out of their legs—the varmints!"

And Ipps went grumbling away to fetch the garden roller, which his master had ordered for his disordered fore-court. I followed Mr. Genny, who had altered his mind about the thrashing since our interview of a few minutes since.

"I'm thinking we'll have sowing in that nine-acred field by the plantation," said Genny; "if ye'll see to it, and get the men together. The drill-plough will soon over that moite of ground. Where's Mr. Thirsk this morning?"

"He is getting up, I believe."

"Ay—is he?"

He inquired concerning Mr. Grey next, but did not appear to attend to my response ; and a few minutes afterwards, he was on his way to the village, on an errand concerning which he did not take the trouble to inform me.

At a later hour Thirsk came sauntering towards the field wherein I was superintending operations.

“ My industrious young man, if you had been only paid piece-work for your services, what a rich man you would have become by this time ! ”

“ Virtue is its own reward.”

“ I don’t even believe that,” said Thirsk.

“ You don’t believe anything.”

“ I believe that Mr. Genny is becoming suspicious of a certain friend of ours. What nonsense was that about footprints, this morning ? ”

“ A suspicion that there had been people late in the night near the farm.”

“ A curious man that Mr. Genny.”

“ And if people take not warning from the shadows before, the coming events may embarrass their plans.”

“ Possibly.”

“ What are you going to do to-day ? ”

“ Oh ! I’m in excellent spirits—I don’t care.”

“ Will you relieve guard ? ”

Thirsk shrugged his shoulders.

“ I don’t mind,” said he, less warmly ; “ there’s very little more of this fun for me, Neider. The good time is coming. Wish me joy.”

“ I wish you joy in everything that will promote your happiness and peace of mind, Thirsk.”

“ Spoken with a reserve. Will you believe that I am stepping fast towards the ‘ Bowers of Bliss,’ as the pantomimes have it ? ”

“ I’ll hope so, for your sake.”

“ ‘ Change into brilliant harlequin,’ says the fairy queen, and lo, the transformation is effected, and the ugly garments, and the great pasteboard mask fly off to the side-wings, and leave the glittering fact in the flesh before us. Neider, you will not know me. To-day a man in the dark ; to-morrow a star of the first magnitude ! ”

“ Have you heard from your father ? ”

"I wouldn't answer the sceptic if I had. No, my own fair exertions lead to my fair future. They will sweeten life when I bask in the sunshine like a lizard. Now, leave me to a sense of coming enjoyment!"

"Certainly."

"And come to my room at nine o' the clock, to receive the five pounds that I owe you."

"Very well."

"And to receive the thanks of a wild man of the woods, about to enter sober society, and take his right place therein. To-day a farm-labourer—to-morrow a gentleman. I shall enjoy the contrast, Neider, exceedingly."

He shook me by both hands—he laughed almost unmeaningly in his excitement. More than once the doubt if he had not been drinking suggested itself to me, he was so strange and restless. I left him to his wanderings in the field, and to his singing wild snatches of song in English and French, and turned my attention to matters connected with my business—work that necessitated my standing at the door of a barn which commanded a view of the farmhouse porch and the great dairy, where the graceful figure of Harriet Genny might cross my range of vision, now and then.

But Harriet Genny was busy within, and I was only rewarded for my pains by a sight of Mr. Genny making his appearance about twelve, in company with a white and tan dog of colossal proportions, and a most forbidding expression of countenance.

I crossed the yard and met Mr. Genny at the gate.

"Take care, Mr. Neider, he's tied by a long chain, and is uncommonly loikely to bite."

"A new dog?" I inquired.

"Ay—and a nipper!"

He proceeded to fasten the dog to a ring in the wall under the parlour window, consequently immediately under the window of Nicholas Thirsk, Esq.

"I shall tie him up short in the day, and give him the run of an uncoomon long chain in the night—I'll have no tramps in my neighbourhood."

"And Nero?"

"Will keep to his own quarters for a day or two, lad.

There now," backing from the ring to which he had fastened the dog to the extremity of the palings, "that's what I call a foine beast, and a credit to any farm. He cost me a couple of guineas, the beggar," added Genny, shaking his fist at him, and eliciting sundry fierce barks and jumps from the dog by way of response.

At the dinner-hour Mr. Thirsk entered the farm-yard, and again the deep voice of the hound aroused the echoes.

"That's a fine addition to your canine stock, farmer," he said, on entering.

"Ay."

"If there's one thing I like more than another, it's a good dog."

"And this will be a credit to us," added Genny; "and I'll warrant ye doan't tame him in a hurry, Mr. Thirsk."

"Do you think I am a Van Amburgh?"

"Humbug or not, he's too much for ye."

"Too much trouble, for I'm pressed for time."

"Ay?" said Genny, interrogatively.

"I think there's a parcel waiting for me at the railway station."

"Shall I send Ipps?"

"No, thank you—it's a parcel of confectionery, and he might eat the contents."

"Ay," said Genny again, and his bushy grey eyebrows bent a little over the keen eyes beneath them.

Thirsk departed early in the afternoon, and entered no further appearance till eight in the evening, before which time I had met with an adventure.

It was a habit of mine to smoke once a-day a favourite German pipe—generally after tea, when the day's business was at an end, and I could ruminante upon the part I had played therein. That particular evening I had put on my hat and strolled out of the farm-house into the green lane running between the farm-land of Mr. Genny, and the dusky plantation of Sir Richard Freemantle, baronet; there I had commenced a promenade of some two or three hundred feet, turning where the road took higher gound, and so back in the direction of the village, passing each time the house wherein I had been some three or four months a sojourner.

It was close on seven in the evening ; the moon had not risen yet, and the road lay deep in the shadow. I was soon in a fair train of thought, after I had once commenced my perambulations. Yesterday had been a happy day, and it had ended happily ; to-day Harriet Genny had been gentle, even shy—there was much to think of and make my heart light.

Suddenly there was a little incident to make my heart leap—the click of a latch in the oak palings fencing in the plantation on the opposite side. I stopped in the shadow of some trees facing it, and extinguished my pipe ; there was something wrong, or something that loved the night, a short distance there across the road. The gate opened, and a female figure came hurrying across towards me, as though she had expected me in that place from the first.

“I thought you might be here, Nicholas—and, oh ! I have been so anxious to——”

She stopped and looked earnestly at me.

“Who are you ?—who are you, in Heaven’s name ?—not *Richard* !” she added, with a strange gasp.

“Neither *Richard* nor *Nicholas*—simply a Mr. Neider, a farm-pupil.”

“You are *Nicho*—you are a friend of Mr. Thirsk’s ?” she said, with an air of great relief.

“I have that honour.”

“He tells me that you are his valued friend—he speaks very highly of you.”

“He is very kind.”

“May I ask—may I ask,” she added, after a struggle with her breath, “if Mr. Thirsk is at the farm, Sir ? I am most anxious to see him for a moment. It is on business of great importance.”

“He has been absent from the farm some hours.”

“Did he say where he was going ?”

“He mentioned the railway station.”

She moaned and wrung her hands, and looked at me with eyes that flashed beneath her veil.

“What is to become of him ?” she cried involuntarily ; “how will it end ? Good Heavens !—how will it end now ?”

“If I can be the bearer of any message to him on his return, Miss Freemantle may command me.”

“ Ah !—you know me ? ”

“ I have had the pleasure of seeing Miss Freemantle and her brother at Welsdon church twice every Sunday for some months.”

“ I hope I *can* trust you, Sir,” she said almost beseechingly.

“ You may trust me,” was my rejoinder.

Had I expressed any vehement language at this juncture, I believe that she would have fled back to the private wicket in the fence—my simple statement seemed to afford her courage.

“ Will you kindly be the bearer of this note from—from a friend of mine to Mr. Thirsk ? ” she said, placing a sealed letter in my hand—“ will you assure him that that friend fears still, and has altered her intention—must, by the force of circumstance, alter it to-night. Tell him that Mercy Ricksworth is discharged too, and—”

“ Mercy Ricksworth ! ”

“ Do you know her, Sir ? ”

“ Only as a niece of Mr. Genny’s, who visits the farm sometimes. I am sorry to hear that she has left Sir Richard’s service.”

“ No matter—no matter,” said she, hurriedly ; “ will you convey my message to Mr. Thirsk ? —it may be partly in the letter, it may not. I am—my poor friend,” she corrected, “ is too distracted, God help her, to remember the few hasty sentences which she has penned, in the fear that she might not meet him here to tell him all. I hope you understand me, Mr. Neider ? ”

“ Perfectly.”

“ Will you repeat my message to me ? ”

I did so.

“ You will be a true friend to him, if you do not deceive me. And I, Sir—for my friend—shall ever be eternally indebted.”

She was across the road, and through the park-fence, before I could reply. I could hear the rustle of her dress amongst the trees, and the hasty pattering of her light glancing feet rapidly receding. I listened for the last faint footfall, and then returned bewildered to the farm, where the methodical life in the farm parlour contrasted so strangely with the adventure I had met.

I felt almost like a culprit in their midst—a fellow-conspirator with Nicholas Thirsk against the peace and happiness of something or some one. However, I had promised, and I had no right to let my embarrassment betray me. I played whist with Genny, his niece, and Grey, and lost every trick, and trumped Grey my partner's highest cards, and made wild snatches at Mr. Genny's, and was shouted at for my pains.

"Are your brains wool-gathering, lad?" said Genny, when he had lost patience at my many blunders; "or are ye after some girl down in Welsdon, or some girl after ye, now? Ay!"

Thirsk's entrance relieved me from the difficulty of responding to this question; he came in with a light ringing tread, and carried his head so high that he looked some inches taller.

"Whist again!" he cried; "upon my word, this almost comes within the act against gambling, Mr. Genny."

"Ay!"

"You look very comfortable, you four, this September night," he continued; "shall we make it loo, for sociability's sake?"

"I doan't intend to play any more to-night," was Genny's sullen answer.

"I want to see you all smiling to-night—the best of goo' l company—and to be the best of good company myself. Come now!"

And having put his hat on a side table, he sat down by Grey's side.

But Mr. Genny was not inclined to reciprocate the advances of Mr. Thirsk—on the contrary, turned a very icy front to the genial mood of his versatile pupil. Nothing that Thirsk could say or do had any effect on him, and a few minutes afterwards he was asking for his chamber candle-stick.

"You haven't supped, uncle."

"Ay! and I doan't mean."

And with this parting growl, Mr. Genny took himself to bed.

"Fall in the price of wheat, and threatened increase of a sixpence per acre on land," muttered Thirsk.

"Neither, Sir!" responded Miss Genny.

"Something must have happened to upset our worthy host, I fear, Miss Genny," said Thirsk; "I cannot remember ever being a witness to so much courtesy."

"My uncle has his reasons, Sir."

"I hope you do not think that I am severe upon your uncle, Miss Genny," said Thirsk; "I am only hurt at his hard manner towards me. Shall we continue the game?"

"It is late," said Harriet.

"All against me!" cried Thirsk, "the short answer and the cold glance to all my attempts at good-will. I will imitate Mr. Genny's wise example."

He went out of the room, and came in a moment afterwards with a chamber candlestick. He walked straight towards Miss Genny, and extended his hand.

"Good-night, Miss Genny."

She did not appear to notice the movement, but returned his good-night.

"Do you bear any malice against me?"

"I, Sir?" and Harriet looked up in some surprise.

"For all my past demeanours, wild, restless, excitable, uncharitable, do you bear me ill-will? Honestly now, Miss Genny?"

"No, Sir."

"Then shake hands with me, and say good-night. It's an odd humour of mine, but it's a good one, and leads me to ask pardon for all past offences. Good-night, Miss Genny."

And he would not withdraw his hand, which Harriet, to end his persistence, lightly touched. The scene reminded me of Sunday afternoon's when I was equally as persevering—but the contrast in her manner was very flattering to me, and gave me quite a flutter of delight.

Mr. Grey and I, both thinking we could dispense with supper that night, accompanied Nicholas Thirsk up stairs. On the landing he went through the same ceremony with Grey as he had with Miss Genny.

"Good-night, Grey," said he, "you will excuse this frivolity of mine?"

"Certainly."

They shook hands, and Grey went into his room. Thirsk beckoned me into his own.

"Just a few moments, Neider, before I bid you good-night, and pay you five pounds that I owe you."

"Just a few moments also, Thirsk," I said. "Before you begin—there's a letter for you."

He snatched it from my hands, and glared at the superscription. His whole manner changed on the instant—his better and brighter looks, the smile upon his lips, the laughing light in his eyes.

"Where did you get this?"

"It was given to me by Miss Freemantle."

"Damnation!" he vociferated.

He tore the letter open and read the lines it contained, his face darkening more and more. I could see his hands tremble as they clutched the paper, ere they tore it into a hundred pieces, and dropped them at his feet.

"Now—your message!"

I delivered it, adding, also, the cause that had led Miss Freemantle to make me the bearer of her missive. He heard me patiently throughout, and then burst forth into a torrent of oaths and blasphemy, such as in all my life I never hope to hear again.

"Thirsk, Thirsk! is this madness?"

"Raving madness!" he cried; "leave me, ere I think of cutting your throat, and my own too. And yet I won't give it up, like a fool, for a word—I'll—I'll—" and he strode to his window and looked out.

"Where's that accursed dog, I wonder?"

He turned round on me.

"Haven't you gone yet?"

"I thought you might have something more to say to me."

"Do you want your five pounds?" he sneered.

"I can dispense with the amount for a week or two."

"Then good-night."

And he almost slammed the door upon me.

\* \* \* \* \*

Early the following morning Mr. Genny's new dog was lying dead under the parlour window. It had been poisoned in the night.

## CHAPTER VI.

## ON DEFENCE.

THERE was no small excitement at Follingay farm on the following morning. The new defender of the house of Genny, lying dead in the path, was a sight that was unexpected and unprepared for ; the farm-servants and dairy-maids flocked round, and made speculations concerning it, and thought the time was rapidly advancing when they would all be murdered in their precious beds.

To each of his subordinates Mr. Genny had said, “ Do ye know anything aboot this ? ” and pointed with his whip to the prostrate beast, and even included his farm-pupils and his niece in the general interrogatory.

“ Perhaps it be only a matter of form, Mr. Neider,” said Genny, upon asking me, “ but I’ll put the question to every living thing that can speak the Queen’s English. I shall be more cautious in my movements when there’s a liar aboot me that I can’t foind out.”

Mr. Genny was in a towering passion, and I passed over the rudeness of his speech. That he did not suspect me was natural enough, but that he made a pretence of examining his whole staff to render the criticism of one gentleman in particular less prominent, was evidently his plan.

And that gentleman appeared in the morning, looking rather pale and haggard, but composed in demeanour, and quite his usual self. I was surprised to see him ; I fancied that I had had my last conversation with him yesterday, and that his mind had been made up to a secret and hasty departure from the farm wherein he had learned so little, and perplexed so many.

“ Good-moorning, Mr. Thirsk,” said Genny, as he came from the house ; “ do ye know anything of this, now ? Ye’re aboot the last one that’s left to ask, Sir.”

“ A dead dog ? No, I don’t know how he died, or where his soul’s gone.”

“ I’m not anxious aboot his soul, Mr. Thirsk.”

"I should be anxious about removing his body from the premises. It's an ugly sight on an empty stomach."

"Ye know nothing about this, then?"

"I know since daybreak that there has been an infernal hubbub under my window. But as to who killed him, I rest in perfect ignorance."

"Ye couldn't make a guess, now?"

"I wouldn't be so uncharitable as to cast a suspicion on one who might be as pure as the driven snow," responded Thirsk. "Still, there's one question I should like to ask, in return for the many unfair ones—discourteous, I may say—with which you have favoured me."

"Ay, Sir," returned Genny.

"Are you quite certain—could you take your Bible oath upon it—that this is not a case of—*felo de se?*"

And, laughing heartily at his own "catch," Nicholas Thirsk left the farmer to mourn over the mortal remains of his last purchase, and to send after his mocking farm-pupil a curse, which was not so subdued but that that young gentleman might have possibly received it.

"I loike a joke in season," said Genny to me; "but, darm it! when it's out o' season it's loike a blight on the beans. And a darm'd unseasonable two-faced fellow he be!" cried Genny; "and whoever he may be who killed a beast that never harmed him, don't let him wander o' nights again, or I'll riddle him with gun-shot."

Later in the day I observed a difference in Harriet Genny. I was quick to detect a difference, and she was certainly more reserved and more irritable than usual. One of those strange petulant fits of temper appeared to have set in, and was the more apparent from its contrast with her fair moods of the preceding days. I could scarcely think the death of her uncle's dog had affected her so much.

"I fear that I have been unfortunate enough to offend you again," I ventured to say on the first opportunity that presented itself.

"Do you think that I am always taking offence like a child?"

"I think you are different this morning."

"Everything is different, Sir—we honest farm-folk are becoming enwrapped in a halo of mystery, and it is an oppres-

sive atmosphere, that tries one's temper, somewhat. We did not know what mystery meant until Mr. Thirsk and you came amongst us."

"Why do you couple our names together, Miss Genny, as though we were both conspirators?"

"You cannot guess who killed my uncle's dog?"

"Oh! the dog again!" I cried petulantly. "No."

"You do not believe Mr. Thirsk poisoned it?"

"I do not."

And I had not thought so for an instant. Had Mr. Thirsk attempted such a proceeding, he must have opened the window, or made some attempt to attract the dog's attention, and the barking of the animal would have followed on the instant.

"Mr. Neider, I hope you are not falling into the power of that man," she said.

"I assure you it is not likely."

"You and he talked long and passionately last night in his room," she said; "had I cared to play the eavesdropper I might have learned something that would have thrown a light upon this act."

"Miss Genny, you suspect me?" I cried indignantly.

"Your actions might be clearer—you have at least chosen for a friend a very reckless man—you are stepping into a snare, Sir, and I warn you of him."

"You are wrong, believe me."

"I am beginning to discredit everyone," she said coldly; "where I have had faith, faith and all sank with me—where I have trusted most, I have found most cunning. I begin to doubt again my powers of discernment, now you who feign to be a 'mother's boy,' a youth not twenty-one yet, deceive me with an ingenuous air that proves how good an actor you are."

I stood bewildered—this was so grave a charge, and from one whom I would have had foster generous thoughts concerning me.

"Will you enlighten me further?"

I was answered by a sharp "No."

"To say no more is to leave me under the brand of a suspicion which I have no power to refute. I have a right to defend myself, at least."

“ I don’t require a defence.”

“ But you have accused me, and have even judged me in your own mind as dishonourable. Do you think I will live in this house under so cruel a stigma ? ”

“ Don’t shout, Mr. Neider ! ” she said irritably.

“ I wish to defend myself—and I will ! ”

“ There, I will take *your* word that there is no plan hatching to blow up Follingay farm—will that content you ? ”

“ Nothing will content me but a fair statement of your suspicions.”

“ There is no occasion for explanation.”

She appeared vexed that she had been drawn so far into discussion with me, or that she had said so much. She attempted a light vein, and even smiled once more, but I remained obdurate. She hesitated still, and I fancied spoke at last with a heightened colour.

“ I spoke of mystery, Mr. Neider,” said she—“ of a strangeness in your actions, that, at least to me, appears new to your character. And yet, after all, there is not much mystery in two young men quarrelling, or in one young man, who shall be nameless, meeting a lady in the high roads after dusk. Young men quarrel and fall in love, and keep their tongues wisely silent on the matter—your youth only misled me a little.”

“ Why do you harp upon my youth so much ? ”

“ More questions ? ” she said, with a forced laugh ; “ when will it please you to make this court of inquisition a trifle less severe ? ”

“ Miss Genny, I am on my defence—I forgot it for the moment.”

“ Do forget it altogether, and not stand before the door there, as if you were a thief-taker.”

“ And my defence is,” I continued, not heeding her remark, “ that I did not quarrel with Mr. Thirsk, and that my accidental meeting with a lady——”

“ Oh ! I don’t want to hear anything about your ladies,” she said, and made a hasty dash past me before I could stop her.

Still my defence was a lame one, and perhaps it was as well now that she was disinclined to ask too many questions.

I might have betrayed too much of Nicholas Thirsk's movements, which would have been unfair to him, as they did not concern Follingay folk, and had only, up to the present time, involved the death of a Follingay dog. I was very glad to have turned the tables somewhat upon her—some day hence I might relate the whole story, and clear away a little more of that oppressive atmosphere against which she had entered her energetic protest.

That I had cleared the atmosphere uncongenial to me, which had threatened to increase in density between us, was at least satisfactory ; and the manner of Harriet Genny was once more the new manner of two days ago—nothing new or strange to anyone save me, and only to me, a different inflexion in her voice, a less cold look upon the face that seemed ever shadowed by the past or future—*Which?*



## CHAPTER VII.

### PLACE SEEKING.

LATE that evening three visitors arrived at the farm. We were in full force in the farm parlour, diversely occupied at the time. Mr. Genny was somewhat ostentatiously cleaning and oiling a favourite fowling-piece, which generally hung over his bed-room mantelshelf—a gun with which I had more than once seen him shoot Sir Richard Freemantle's pheasants, when they intruded on his land, and there was no one by to see them afterwards disappear in his capacious pockets ; Mr. Thirsk was making entries in a notebook ; Edmund Grey was spelling over a country paper ; Harriet was knitting by the fireside ; and I was attempting a second letter less glowingly mendacious, to my mother at home.

Those visitors separated in the passage outside—one remaining quietly with his back against the street-door, and the two being shown in by a dairy-maid off duty. The unobtrusive individual was Mr. Ricksworth, and the

more apparent visitors were Mrs. Ricksworth and her daughter Mercy.

"Who be that in the passage?" said Genny, sharply.

"My father, uncle."

"Let him coom in, then, with the rest of ye."

"He thought you mightn't like to see him, Matthew," said Mrs. Ricksworth, "after what happened once here."

"After what happened fifty toimes here," corrected her brother; "tell him to coom in—I don't loike people I can't trust in my passages."

"You're hard, Matthew—but no harder than he deserves, though I say it that shouldn't," said Mrs. Ricksworth. "Mercy, tell your father to come in."

Mr. Ricksworth, with a somewhat sheepish air, and with a sidelong walk, came into the room, thus adjured, and with a humble "good-evening," addressed to the general company, deposited himself on a third chair, by the side of his daughter. With the exception of Mr. Grey, who crumpled up the newspaper, and thrust it behind him on the hard sofa, the rest of us continued our respective employments.

They were a strange trio, sitting a little apart from the general company — one could scarcely imagine them representatives of the same family. Mercy Ricksworth sat between her father and mother, well and brightly dressed, with her handsome face a shade more pale than usual, and her hands inclined to little restless movements in her lap ; her mother sat still and angular on her chair, very upright in form, and inexpressibly grim—a white-faced, sour-tempered looking woman, with a nose more hooked than her brother's. Years ago it had been a happier-looking face, but time and a bad husband, and a child to support for twelve years, had rendered it inflexible. Hers had been an uphill life, and she carried the wear and tear of the journey on her countenance. Her liege lord and husband, almost as thin as his wife, but more than a head and shoulders taller—and she was a tall woman—lounged back in his chair, with his hands in his pockets, his long legs thrust out to their fullest extent, and his swarthy hirsute face wearing not quite so devil-may-care an expression as usual—a fact accounted for by his being not quite so drunk.

“Well, what’s the matter ? ” said Genny, after the pause that succeeded their entrance had lasted a little too long.

“It’s bad news that has brought us here, Matthew,” said his sister.

“Ay—there’s small doubt of that, I take it.”

“Our life’s bad news, thanks to *him*,” with a glance at her husband ; “and, though I say it that shouldn’t, it’ll never be any better till I tuck him up in his coffin.”

“Go it, mum,” muttered Ricksworth, ironically.

“And so, as he’s made his bed, and must lie on it, I haven’t come, Matthew, to ask a favour for the likes on him. I’ve seen the end of all my preaching long ago.”

“I ain’t,” was Ricksworth’s sententious comment.

“Well, well, well, what is it ? ” cried the farmer.

“You might give me time, Matthew,” said his sister, in an aggrieved tone ; “I don’t often trouble you by coming here—we ain’t respectable people, and you’ve got on in the world, and hold your head high, and keep a banker in the county town. Ay ! ” she said, with her brother’s intonation of that useful interjection, “you’re a great man ! ”

Mr. Genny grunted.

“And you’re my flesh and blood, too ; and though you don’t think of the likes of us much, yet we’ve a little claim on you. Those who haven’t forfeited it, at least.”

She looked at her husband, who winced and inspected the ceiling.

“I don’t even have the washing,” muttered Mrs. Ricksworth.

“Haven’t I enough hands to wash at home ? ” retorted her brother ; “did you ever know me fling my mooney in the streets ? ”

“I can’t say that I have.”

Mercy broke in at this place.

“Mother, I had better explain the reasons that have brought us here.”

“Ay—do,” said her uncle.

“Shall I ? ” she asked her mother.

“You’ve been brought up different like, and the Hall folk

paid for your schooling when my husband had drunk the money away that was put by for it—I say it that shouldn't ; but he deserves it—" she added, by way of parenthesis ; and then went on again, " and so tell your uncle why we've come here. P'raps I am a little tedious and disagreeable, now we don't live under the same roof, Matthew, and there's a couple of tombstones in the churchyard of Welsdon that tell of two that loved us alike."

" Ay—ay," said Genny, in a softened tone ; " go on, Mercy."

" It's a very simple matter, uncle," began Mercy, thus adjured, " I could have performed my task better alone, I think."

" Ay ! " was the hearty response.

" But mother thought she might have influence with you, and I wished my father to come."

" Thank'ee," muttered Genny.

" He is rather unsettled just now, and we didn't wish to leave him at home."

" He'd have taken something out of the house, and sold it," remarked Mrs. Ricksworth.

Ricksworth continued looking at the ceiling. Nothing seemed to affect his nerves, or cover him with shame. He had been railed against so long, from the outer world as well as in that family circle of which he was not a distinguished ornament, that his case-hardened front turned off such little pellets as fell upon him then. Besides which, Mrs. Ricksworth was quite correct in her remarks, and in sober moments he never demurred to the truth.

Mercy coloured, however, at her mother's remark, and cast a hasty glance towards her ; but Mrs. Ricksworth was taking snuff from a round rosewood box at that moment and missed the signs of her daughter's indignation.

" It's a very short story, uncle—I have left the Freemantle's service."

" Ay !—how's that ? " and Mr. Genny paused, with a camel's-hair pencil full of oil, and stared at his niece.

" Sir Richard Freemantle gave me notice to leave him last night."

" A month's notice, or a month's wages, I suppose," said Genny, with an eye to business.

“A month’s wages.”

“Sharp work,” said Genny; “and what brought about such a sudden change at the Hall?”

Mercy’s face flushed, but she remained silent. The farmer repeated his question.

“It can’t matter—it’s a long story, and I’m not much to blame in it.”

“Ye’re not obliged to confess your shortcomings, certainly,” said Genny; “but to your own uncle there moight be a little straightforwardness, I reckon.”

“There’s a big heap of chaps here,” suddenly commented Ricksworth.

“Ay!—I had forgotten. Some other time, then ——”

“Mercy’s a girl who takes after her own father in the matter of stubbornness,” remarked Mrs. Ricksworth; “I know about as much as you do.”

“Devil take your babbling!” blurted forth Ricksworth, with a demoniac cast of countenance; “can’t you do anything else but foul your own nest, you old magpie?”

“Hollo, here!” cried Genny, “we don’t have anything of this sort here, ye know. Drop it—or go!”

“I’ll drop my sledge-hammer fist on her ugly jaws in a minute!” continued the unpacified Ricksworth.

“You may if you like,” said Mrs. Ricksworth, in her usual calm tones; “it won’t be the first time that I have felt the weight of your fist, though I say it that shouldn’t.”

“Ricksworth, if ye say another word, ye’ll go out in the yard, my man,” said Genny, with a menacing look.

“All right, guv’nor—it’s only my play.”

And this playful ruffian cocked his eyes at the ceiling once more.

“I say it’s a story that I’m not much to blame in,” Mercy continued; “I hope you’ll take me at my word. I am not in the habit of telling falsehoods.”

“Ay!”

“The winter’s coming on, and mother’s lost two of her best customers, and I—I haven’t saved a great deal of money in service, and don’t care to be an idler on their hands. I come to you first, uncle—I would rather not leave Welsdon just yet, and mother hopes that there is a vacancy for me at the farm here.”

Genny shook his head slowly to and fro."

"We're overpressed with hands just now."

"What did I say?" said Mercy turning upon her mother.

"He don't say 'No' yet, Mercy"

"Well, it depends now," said Genny; "I don't say 'No' because ye're my sister's daughter, and ye've been a good girl enough, if a trifle too hot and independent now and then. Will ye come into the best parlour for a moment, with Harriet or me?"

She looked from Harriet to her uncle, and then said, "What for?"

"I'm a strict man, and keep to rules. The reason why ye left the Freemantle's?"

She shook her head.

"Then I've no place for ye," said Genny, remorselessly; "unless——"

"Unless——" repeated Mercy.

"Unless I may go to Sir Richard for your character."

"Miss Freemantle will give me a character," said Mercy.

"She didn't take ye. Ye were Sir Richard's servant, lass."

"Mother, shall we come home now?" asked Mercy.

"I will go to Sir Richard in the morning," said Genny.

"If you dare!" cried Mercy, starting to her feet.

"Ay!—I dare!" was the quiet response.

"You will have your trouble for nothing, then—Sir Richard left for London with his sister this morning!"

Thirsk dropped his note-book, picked it up again, and recommenced his numerous entries.

"I'll write to him," said Genny; "the first time I meet him, girl, I'll ask his meaning—mark me!"

"He will tell you nothing—he has given me his word."

"He will give ye a character. He must say 'Yes' or 'No.'"

"He will say 'No,'" cried Mercy, thus driven to bay; "he will refuse all explanation, and decline alluding to me. That's all—now, let us go home, mother—I knew how little any one here cared for our distress."

“ Mercy,” reproved Harriet, in a low tone.

“ You might help me if you could,” said she, more gently; “ but your hands are tied, and I come first to my own kin. Do you know what worry, and driving, and pain it cost me to come here at all ? ”

“ You are agitated, Mercy,” said her cousin; “ you are not speaking calmly.”

“ You are a favourite niece,” taunted Mercy; “ you are all that is good, and amiable, and kind; I am a poor girl, who requires a character for even the place of drudge in my uncle’s house.”

“ Matthew, you’re a hard man,” said his sister, rising and tying her bonnet-strings with two sudden jerks; “ I did think better of you, but it’s ill-thinking what’s in *your* brains, though I say it that shouldn’t. I wish now I hadn’t asked the girl to come here—but it’s hard times at home, and—needs must——”

“ ‘ When the devil drives,’ ” added her uncomplimentary husband.

“ Get up with you ! ” snapped Mrs. R.

“ I am not afraid of the chance of earning my own living. I shall go to London,” said Mercy.

“ Alone ? ” asked her uncle.

“ Yes.”

“ Coom to me before ye go—I shall want to speak to you.”

Mercy gave an impatient shake of her head.

“ Not about this business—say that’s on the shelf, lass.”

“ I will never enter your doors again,” cried the impetuous girl.

“ Then go your own way,” said Genny, losing patience. “ I wish ye well, but ye take after your father, and brazen matters out a little too boldly, girl. I don’t say I woan’t take ye here, or help ye anywhere else—but if ye coom here without a character, and choke-full of mystery, I wouldn’t have ye in my house if ye were twice my niece. Darm my eyes, I have had enough of mystery lastly, without your play-acting nonsense ! ”

“ Why, can’t you tell your uncle, you obstinate girl ? ” said her mother; “ a drunken husband and a stubborn child

—though I say it that shouldn't—the Lord support me in the midst of all this bluster!"

"Now, old woman, come out," said Ricksworth.

"Hold your blating, sottish tongue—it's never still!" said his wife.

"I'm going to let it run just a minute, for your edification, farmer," said Ricksworth, in a louder voice.

He had risen, and his darkling looks were fixed upon his brother-in-law's countenance.

"You're a man in the stirrups, and so coxy. You're a flinty fellow, who turned me away for a trumpery mistake in a sixpence, and so particular—but keep your coxiness and your particulariness to these young slaves here who are under your thumb. You may bully everybody but *her*," with a jerk of his elbow in his daughter's direction; "she's trod on too much now, and she's a good girl—the only one who ever gave a good word to a poor devil of a father who's been a trifle loosish. Keep, my friend, a civil tongue in your head as respects her—or, damme! you may come to grief!"

"Leave my house!" roared Genny.

"And rot your house!—and may its roof fall on your head some day, you scaly vagabond, whose own flesh and blood haven't weight with you—whose——"

His daughter's arm stolethrough his, and drew him towards the door, and her voice was heard beseeching him to be still.

"Well, well, my girl, but he did rile me," I heard him mutter, and he went from the room without another word, his grim-visaged better half bringing up the rear.

## CHAPTER VIII.

## PLACE-LEAVING.

"This might have been all talked over in a more fitting place," growled Genny, when they had departed, and he was looking daggers at Harriet, as though it had been her fault that the meeting had occurred.

"They were asked in here," replied Harriet.

"Ay ! but who had thought of their blazing out their business before all these," said he, petulantly ; "my Gosh ! but this has been a day of sixes and sevens !"

And the stock of his gun came with a clash to the floor.

"Better luck to-morrow," observed Thirsk.

Mr. Genny grunted. The name of Nicholas Thirsk was not registered very legibly in his good books just then.

"To-morrow we die, though," said a practical gent, who took time by the forelock, and was wise enough to have only faith in the present," added Thirsk.

"Ay !—and to-day we die sometimes."

"Especially dogs."

"Ay !" and Genny's eyes flashed fire. Dogs were a sore point just then with the farmer.

"Dogs have their day, though, as well as men—and farmers."

"What do ye mean by that ?" said Genny.

"The meaning is plain enough to a common understanding."

Mr. Genny's hand came with a thump on the table. He had received so many shafts that day, that the last one carried away his self-command, and with no respect for time or place he poured forth the vial of his wrath.

"Measter Thirsk, I've had enough of ye. I'm toired of your darmed gentlemanly sneers, in my own house, where I've been incloined to think myself master. Ye've been a laggard, that's never been worth his salt, and your staying here does no good to me, and much harm to yourself. Ye killed my dog last night, or had a hand in it somehow—

ye ain't here, in this house, with a fair object, and there's something wrong, and false, and un-English aboot ye. And your toime's soon up now, and thank God A'mighty for it, say I!"

And bang came the brown fist on the table again.

Mr Thirsk shut up his pocket-book, and returned it to his breast-pocket. He was cool and collected in the midst of all this vituperation, and there was a mocking curl of his lip, that did not tend to soothe Mr. Genny.

"Steady, Mr. Genny—a rush of blood to the head at your time of life might be serious."

"You heard what I said, Sir."

"I have heard," said he, rising; "and why didn't you say it before? Where was the good of bottling up your indignation, as you bottled up my forty pounds, till your rage rushed out in a lump, and made a brute of you. If you had only said it before, I would have wished you joy of my *douceur*, and shaken the dust of your butter-smelling den from my feet."

"I say it noo!"

"Then I will leave you now. Within one hour, Mr. Genny, I shall have great pleasure in taking my departure."

"When ye loike, Sir," muttered Genny, who was, however, taken a little aback by Thirsk's prompt acquiescence with his wishes.

"I will see to my luggage—I beg pardon, my carpet-bag," said he; "and then farewell to you all."

And Nicholas Thirsk walked briskly up stairs.

"Gie me the red book—gie me the red book," spluttered Mr. Genny, "if he goes to-night, I maun gie him the balance between this and the middle of October—and darme glad to gie it him too. Mr. Grey, will you reach—"

But Mr. Grey had disappeared also—how long a time he had stolen from the room, it was impossible to say.

"Why, where's *he* gone, now—trapassing?"

"I think he left soon after Mercy, uncle," said Harriet, "he has been absent some time."

"Ay—but he's a good lad, and one needn't be troubled long about him. Harriet, have ye seen my red book?"

Harriet had not seen it, but proceeded to look for it on a

side table, amongst a pile of old books, beside the tea-tray. Presently the volume was in Farmer Genny's hands.

Putting on his spectacles, Matthew Genny proceeded to study Mr. Thirsk's account, muttering over it, and drawing in his breath.

"Forty pounds spread over thirteen weeks, is three pounds one and saxpence ha'penny a week, or nearly so," said he, "and he's four weeks short, and that makes twelve pounds, sax and tuppence owing. Harriet, have ye a tuppence handy?"

The account was gone through to his satisfaction, and the little pile of money being placed at his elbow, he put his gun aside, and leaned back in his chair.

"It'll be a moighty relief to have him gone," said Genny, "but it's the first ill parting I've ever had with a pupil of moine. It riles me a little to think that—but if he'd stayed longer, I moight have shot him by mistake one dark noight, and been tried for manslaughter."

"He's a sly fellow."

The sly fellow re-entered the room, bearing his carpet-bag with him.

"Neider," said he, boldly addressing me, as he came in, "shall I pay you your five pounds now?"

"As you please."

"It will leave me with about six and tenpence in the world."

"Then defer the payment *sine die*."

"There's a small amount due to ye, young man," said Genny, pointing to the money on the table.

"Keep it to buy another dog with."

"Ay! then, you did kill it?"

"I did not," responded Thirsk.

"Then take your money, Sir."

Thirsk caught up the money in his hand, and walked towards the fire.

At the same moment one of the maids came into the room, to ask a question of Miss Genny; Thirsk's hand, that had hovered over the flames, paused.

"Here, Patty," said he, walking towards her, "I am going away, and here's something for you girls to buy caps with—remember me in your prayers, my darlings!"

He dropped the handful of gold and silver into her open palm, and left her wide-mouthed and speechless.

“Miss Genny, I’ll wish you good-bye. When I shook hands last night I meant good-bye, but fate was against me. So I mean it now in sober earnest.”

“Good-bye, Sir. I am sorry,” she added, “that any ill-feeling has arisen to part you and my uncle.”

“Will you bestow one wish for my future prosperity?”

“I will wish it, Sir,” said she; “but if you carry the same rashness, I may say the same recklessness, into the world with you, my wishes go for nothing.”

“Still they are well-meant, and I thank you,” said he.

There was the courtesy of a gentleman in his answer. I had not seen him before acting so graceful a part.

“Let me wish you in return,” he said, after shaking hands, “a good husband, and a fairer fortune—I will say a brighter life—than you have experienced hitherto. Let me warn you also.”

“Warn me?”

“Put not your trust in—authors.”

Harriet started and crimsoned, and turned hastily away, and Mr. Thirsk looked towards me.

“Neider, I would ask you to help me to carry my carpet-bag to the station, but you looked wearied.”

“I intend to see you off,” I said.

“Thanks, honest Pythias,” he said; “it is pleasant to meet a friend in the midst of adversity—and the bag *is* heavy! Mr. Genny, good-bye to you.”

“I’ll shake hands, if ye loike,” said Genny, after a pause, and in a low voice; “ye’re leaving my home, and ye’ve been one in it over three months. I’ve spoken my moind and have done with it, and I should loike to part friends.”

“Are the angry waves stilled, Sir?”

“Ay.”

Thirsk hesitated.

“Well, why should I bear *you* malice?—your house has been of infinite service to me, and your hot words did not affect me much. There’s my hand to the bargain that we sink bygones for ever.”

He shook hands with Matthew Genny, and turned towards the door.

“Good luck to Follingay farm,” he said, as he passed into the farm-yard, followed by myself; “I found a friend there, at least.”

He passed his arm through mine as we closed the wicket behind us.

“Don’t you believe me?” he added.



## CHAPTER IX.

### THIRSK BIDS ME FAREWELL.

WHEN we were quit of the farm, Nicholas Thirsk’s first observation startled me a little.

“Are you going to Tramlingford races next week, Neider?”

“That’s an odd question—why do you ask?”

“Because I shall most likely attend that aristocratic reunion.”

“You?”

“I am a lover of the turf; a betting man—a taker of odds against the favourite, or the field.”

“You keep your tastes in the dark, then, Thirsk.”

“Like my friends—eh?”

“Your friends have no right to pry too closely into the inner machinery.”

“Which is complex, and might have a friend’s head off—rewarding undue curiosity by unceremoniously cutting him short,” he added. “Here, catch hold of the carpet-bag—you’ve the muscles of a navvy.”

I relieved guard with his bag, and he looked me full in the face as we walked on arm-in-arm.

“Well?” he said.

“Well?” I responded.

He laughed.

“This is a change over the spirit of my dream,” he said.

“I am sorry that Mr. Genny was hasty,” I remarked.

“I am very glad. I was anxious to reach London to-night.”

“ Ah !—I see.”

“ And Mr. Genny offered me a valid excuse. Who could care to sit and be insulted, *non ami*, when the world lies open before him ? ”

“ You played your part well—but I am sorry it was only a part.”

“ It shows you what a schemer I am. So be it, Neider—I *am* a schemer ! ”

“ A sad avowal enough.”

“ I have been the last four months scheming for a wife—lo ! the secret escapes me in the hour when my heart is full ! ”

“ Are you in jest or earnest, Thirsk ? ”

“ Sober earnest,” he returned. “ I am in a loquacious mood, and inclined to take you into my confidence. I promised it long ago—why should I not keep my word ? You have been tried and not found wanting—upon my soul, you *are* the best friend I have ! ”

“ Thank you.”

“ And the only one—there, I own it ! ”

“ Haven’t I a right to your friendship ? ” I said ; “ didn’t I buy it for five pounds ? ”

“ Your mocking vein sits upon you like a cloak that’s a bad fit,” he added, “ and so have done with it. I was brought up without a mother to love me, and with a sharp-tongued satirical father to sneer down a child’s ingenuousness, and crush out, when I was a man, every idea that was not worldly and mean. And so I put forth evil fruit ! But you kept your boy’s heart until now, and are to be envied.”

There was a touch of sadness in his voice, that convinced me there was no irony in his words—if the stem had been grafted aright, I thought, this might have been a noble tree.

“ I am going to show you a glimpse of the past. In the first place, believe me an unforgiving man.”

“ You haven’t sustained your character well to-night.”

“ I was but stung by a gnat, minor troubles are nothing to me,” he answered, carelessly ; “ give me a great injury, and I will nurse it on my death-bed. Sir Richard Freemantle injured me in the youthful days to which I have alluded.”

“In what manner?”

“He was a younger man then, by four or five years—a cold-hearted frog of a fellow, and guardian to his half-sister Agatha.”

“Miss Freemantle?”

“The same. He was a friend of my father’s: they were,—possibly are,—both members of a dusty, moth-eaten institution, where dead men’s bones, and dead men’s obsolete handicrafts, are the chief objects of worship. He had a brother then, who was my friend—and that brother and I were at an age to laugh at their antiquarian researches, and left to ourselves to seek a gayer world beyond them. Sir Richard thinks to this day that I led his brother into temptation; but his brother was a greater hypocrite than I, and—led *me*! Sir Richard exerted his authority, but we took no heed—we were youths of twenty, with the world before us, and no mothers to pray for our better lives. He was more daring than I—and he broke up and died. By that time Sir Richard had poisoned my father’s mind against me——”

“Are you sure?”

“I judge by the result,” said Thirsk. “My father lectured and preached, and sneered and cursed, and finally—cast me adrift!”

He set his teeth, and shook his clenched hand in the air.

“I went to Paris after that, and at Paris I met accidentally Sir Richard’s half-sister Agatha. She was completing her education, and the husband of her governante was friend No. 2 of mine. Do you guess the rest now?”

“You fell in love with her?”

“Yes—and she was an heiress.”

The words were strangely coupled together. In his final remark it sounded like a reason for his love.

“And she was a girl of seventeen, of a romantic turn of mind, and so fell in love with me. And the old, old story went on for a year and a half; and then, like a vulture, there swooped down on our wooing the half-brother and parted us.”

“And how did she bear the parting?”

“Why, she was a girl who loved me; she had read many novels, where the guardian is always the evil genius, and

the lover the best and most exemplary of mortals. And she held fast to her plighted troth, and will hold fast to the end—the bright end, wherein I shall overreach her cautious brother, and become a rich man by one stroke."

" You will wait for her coming of age ? " I said.

" I will wait a week or two—no longer. She will not be of age for two years."

" And this accounts for your stay at the farm ? "

" A profitable stay, that might have ended satisfactorily, if Sir Richard had not suddenly detected our correspondence, and discharged our faithful go-between."

" Mercy Ricksworth ? "

" The same fair damsel ; a brave girl, who would have gone through fire and water for her mistress, as her mistress would go through fire and water for a gentleman of my intimate acquaintance."

" And the fittings out of the window ? "

" Don't be shocked—it wasn't to meet the lady of my love, but to hide my love-letters at the back of an old sundial on Sir Richard's lawn, or in the ruins of 'my Lady's Chamber' up at the castle. Still, when the hour was early, and there was a chance—thanks to Mercy Ricksworth !—we met once or twice and renewed our vows, and promised to be faithful unto death—just like Romeo and Juliet in the balcony scene. Last night we were to have run away for good. You know the rest."

" And Genny's dog ? "

" Did not die by my hand, although it was conveniently put out of my way by—but I won't tell you everything. You are so gloomy over my recital, that I begin to repent my confidence."

" I do not see the end of the story."

" Two happy lovers united in the holy bonds of matrimony—I swear it ! "

" And you really love Miss Freemantle ? "

" Do you doubt my word ? "

" You hate her brother, you say ? " I said doubtfully.

" If I live a hundred years, I shall hate him ! "

" When you have married Miss Freemantle——"

" His shadow shall not mar my rejoicings," said Thirsk ; " he and I will be for ever apart."

There was a long silence between us ; we had passed through the village of Welsdon, and were making rapid progress to the railway station before he spoke again.

“ So my friends some day will all come back, and you must be in their midst to support me. I will look my creditors in the face, and live the life of the blessed ! Is not this ‘ a bold stroke for a wife ? ’ ”

“ You appear to me to think more of the riches in store than the wife that awaits you. I hope I am wrong.”

“ To be sure,” he replied carelessly ; “ do you think, in all marriages for money, there are no romance and poetry ? I tell you I shall be a happy fellow.”

“ The money may be tied up in some way.”

“ Only till she is one-and-twenty—then no hand can stay it. And there are fifty ways of getting money in advance from the crafty tribe of Judah, or even from one’s respectable solicitor. Is that the station light across the field ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ How time flies in decent society ! You will not forget Tramlingford race-course, on the *second* day of the race.”

“ You will meet me there ? ”

“ Or write to you before that day. If I write not, look out for me.”

“ What will bring you back to this part of the world ? ”

“ Oh ! let me have a little mystery—I shall have much to tell you then. And now, Alfred Neider, let me give you a warning as well as Genny’s niece. Take care of love in a farm-house.”

“ What do you mean ? ”

“ I have a fancy that you are drifting, *nolens volens*, in a certain direction, where there are quicksands and sunken rocks, and everything in the way of fair sailing ! ”

“ Speak plainer, man,” said I impatiently

“ I daren’t, without betraying the confidence of friend No. 2.”

“ I thought that you had only one friend in the world.”

“ Only one worth the name, certainly. Let me have a turn at the bag.”

“ It’s all right—I’m not tired.”

“ What powers of endurance you have ! I wish I had your strong arm and broad chest.”

“Aren’t you strong enough?”

“Shaky at times—nothing to boast of. Here’s the station.”

We entered the station, where there was a bustle of preparation amongst two guards, a loutish boy in fustian, and three or four passengers.

“Guard!” Thirsk cried, in a loud voice—“see to my luggage.”

“Yes, Sir.”

And the surprised guard took the shabby carpet-bag, and tried to make out his visitor from under the peak of his cap.

“Only one pigeon-hole, guard?—I suppose I can get a third-class ticket to London thereat.”

“Ye-es, Sir.”

And the guard looked at him again, and cursed him under his breath for his impudence.

“How nicely I calculated the time for lighting old Genny’s powder-magazine!” he said, returning with the ticket in his hand; “the train’s due in two minutes.”

We went out on the dark platform and waited for the train—Thirsk speaking ever of the bright future in store for him. He was in high spirits—the farming profession had evidently been a weight upon his soul. He was young, too—only five-and-twenty—and youth is sanguine, and builds castles, and peoples them with phantoms.

With a roar and rush came the hissing engine and its train to the little country station, which he had sought four months ago on the same day as myself. His hopes were high then, and mine had not been born!

The doors opened and slammed, the few passengers bound Londonwards changed positions with two labouring men and a lame woman, the whistle sounded shrilly in the night air, the train moved on its dark way.

“Remember Tramlingford!” cried Thirsk.

“All right! My best wishes for your real prosperity, Thirsk.”

“Same to you, whatever it may mean. And beware of love in a farm-house!”

A hasty grip of the hand, a short laugh, and Thirsk was borne on his way, with perhaps fifty schemers like him.

## CHAPTER X.

## GREY'S CASE.

I HAD much to perplex me on my way back to the farm. The hasty departure of Thirsk, the hurried confession he had made me, and the reservation that had lurked in the midst of his apparent confidence. That he kept something back, that it was his nature to hide something in the secret recesses of a heart that would never beat calmly and equably, I was convinced.

And yet I was convinced, too, that it all might have been different ; but his was a nature which had ran wild, and had had no generous culture ; and so, to quote his own mocking words, had put forth evil fruit. There must have been a time, there *was* a time, when a word in the right season would have turned him from the path he was pursuing, and led him on to better things ; but the real friends were few, and indolent or imperceptive—and so from bad to worse, and all the fair young shoots trodden in the dust. For there were flashes, at times, of a fair thought, an honest impulse yet ; and though he drove on with the adverse wind and sea, a faint effort to resist still shone forth, if at uncertain intervals. I suppose there never was a noble nature utterly cast down and rendered vile. From the abyss must wail forth, at times, some regret for the misspent past that has ended in ruin.

Why I should have these gloomy thoughts on my return, was a matter of doubt ; he had left me in good spirits, sanguine as to the result of his enterprise, and rejoiced to be quit of farming life and adventure.

True, he had spoken little of passion, and a great deal of the money that his scheming would bring him ; and my own love troubles had set in, and, perhaps, tinged me with a hue not wholly unromantic.

There is a romantic episode in most men's lives, and I, at least, did not escape. When my hand was on the farm-house gate, I thought of the warning with which Thirsk had

favoured me, and wondered how he had guessed a secret only self-confessed but a short while since. As if to eyes commonly observant such secrets can be kept, when a whisper, look, or blush, will throw one "moon-struck" off his guard!

It was late for the folk at Welsdon, and only Mr. Genny was sitting up for me—a substitute for his niece which I did not particularly admire.

"Ye be late, lad."

"I saw him off by the nine p.m. train."

"To Loondon?"

"Yes."

"So there's an end of a hare-brained young mon, who will ne'er do any good in the world," commented Genny; "I reckon I needn't sit up with my gun to-noight, Mr. Neider."

"You suspect him still?"

"Ay—and I have suspected him some toime for the matter of that, though I went a blundering way to find him out. There be your supper, lad."

"I don't care about supper to-night, thank you."

"Darm it, I shall save by ye supperless people!" cried he; "this Thirsk maun have turned all your stomachs. There's Grey gone up stairs as white as a ghost."

"Indeed!"

"And Harriet's oot of temper, and ye won't have any supper. We're getting moighty cheerful here. Why, *I* bean't even quite myself."

"I'm sorry to hear it."

"There ha' been such a stir up to-day aboot one thing and the oother—dogs, and nieces, and Thirsk. And how that girl Ricksworth troobles me, too!"

"Indeed!"

"Don't go up just this moment, now. Ye're a sensible koind of lad, take you altogether. Not quite so much nonsense aboot ye as most people of your age."

"Thank you for the compliment," I said, laughing.

"Do *ye* think, now—sit doon, lad, sit doon—that I was hard on the girl? She worries me."

And he leaned his elbow on his knee, and clasped his odd-shaped forehead with his hand.

"There might have been a better, a milder way of telling Mercy her services were not required, perhaps."

"I'm not a foine gentleman, with foine words always ready," said he; "my education bean't much to brag of, and I speak fair and short, and to the purpose. But Harriet says I was hard on her—that she is as much my niece as herself—which be true enough—and—and in fact that I was more than rough to her. She forgets how I have been put out all day."

"Mercy may come round in the morning."

"Not she—she has an awful spirit of her own, and always has had. It'll bring her to trouble some day. Now, look here, Mr. Neider."

He began to beat time with one hand on the other.

"I'm a man of my woord, and I worn't ha' her without a character. I doan't doobt her, mind ye, but we Gennys be a little obstinate—all but one poor deevil of our stock, who'll be here in the race week—and if she says noa, I say noa, and stick to it. Still, if she goes to London, as she talks aboot, I should loike to help her with a poond or two. It's hard to have one's hand always in one's pocket, but if I thought nobody would know it, I shouldn't mind a couple—of—poonds."

He drawled the words out as though they were a couple of pounds of flesh he thought of disposing to some one in the Shylock line of business.

"Harriet maun't know it," he said, suddenly.

"Oh!"

"We've had a bit of a quarrel to-night—an up-and-downer, for a change. Lord! we haven't wrangled now a year or more, but she be awful hot when she thinks anybody's in the wrong, and I've been sharper than I meant, too. And so, if ye could manage to meet—accidently loike—my neice, Mercy, to-morrow or next day, ye moight tell her there's no offence taken or meant—and there's her passage to London, or something till she gets a place. Two poonds, didn't I say?"

And he began rummaging in his trousers' pocket. My first impulse was to reject the commission which he was anxious to thrust upon me; I was almost a stranger to the Ricksworths—the office was not a grateful one, and I had

some doubts whether his niece would accept the proffered gift. His next remark, however, altered my determination.

"Ye may see the moother if ye loike, and let her keep it for Mercy till she goes away, or spend it if she stays too long at home. If Ricksworth be in the way, leave the matter to a better toime. Ye doan't moind, now?"

"No, Sir."

"Ay!—ye're a good lad."

And he dropped two sovereigns into my hand.

"And I'm thinking we've wasted a good deal of candle-light—good-noight, Mr. Neider."

"Good-night, Sir."

I went to my room, where I was surprised to find William Grey sitting on the corner of his bed, with a very tumbled head of hair, and a face colourless and blank.

"Why, Grey, what's the matter?"

"Shut the door, there's a good fellow," he said, quickly, "or old Genny will hear you."

"Is anything wrong?" I asked, after closing the door, as directed.

"I have made a fool of myself—that's all."

"That's an affliction that will befall each of us in turn."

"What consolation is that to me?"

"Not much—just at present."

"Neider, I never could keep a secret—I'm going to let you into this one."

More confidence!—more love affairs!—would this night of incident never be at an end? I should be glad to sleep upon it all, and wake up in the morning less burdened with other people's trouble.

"It's soon told, so don't look so weary over it," said he; "it's all been brought about by that old brute!"

"Ricksworth?"

"No—Genny—*her* uncle."

"Oh!—go on."

"I couldn't stand it any longer, so I went out after them, and followed them to their cottage, at the back of the village—we've passed it fifty times, you know—and asked to see Mercy, and"—with a great gulp down of something in his throat—"saw her."

“Grey, you were never so hasty?”

“I always strike whilst the iron’s hot, and my heart was full—and, God knows, I had loved her long enough.”

“It’s an ill-starred love, Grey—the more I think of it, the more I feel certain. And she accepted you?”

“Accepted me!” cried Grey, “as if I should be sitting here a miserable devil, all gooseflesh, if she had.”

“Refused you?—refused you?” I repeated twice.

I could not understand it; here was a chance in life for Mercy Ricksworth; such as she could have hardly expected—a young, good-looking, well-to-do man, whose unselfish heart had chosen her before the world.

“I asked her very plainly, very earnestly, to be my wife—I told her I might be my own master almost at any time, and that my family would be glad to think her one of them. And she dashed down every hope by an angry ‘No,’ that came like a thunderbolt upon me. So it’s all over.”

“It is best, Grey.”

“Well, it’s easy to say that, if not to think so.”

“Years hence, you will thank your stars for the escape.”

“I told you once I never changed—I shan’t in this case, where I have felt the most deeply. Oh! Neider, I have seen so much to love in that girl; beneath the surface of a hasty excitable temperament, there is a deep, true feeling—an earnest thought for others. For all but me, from whom she turns away!”

“Courage, you are young, and will not break your heart over this.”

“I shall never forget her, Neider—my love was a slow growth, and its roots struck deep. And you *will* think it a hasty dash on my part, because you know so little of me,” he added, petulantly.

“May I ask a question?”

“Fifty—I am ashamed of nothing.”

“Did she ever encourage you?—lead you on to think that she might return your affection?”

“How could she know I loved her, before I confessed all to-night, and frightened her out of her wits!” he cried.

“She might have guessed it, in all probability.”

“Well, I thought she knew at times—and then I didn’t

think so, sometimes she was low-spirited, then she was light-hearted and almost a sister to me—and then she was like a spoiled child, and then all sunshine again. Oh ! ”

And he doubled his fist and punched his pillow savagely.

“ I’m off to London next week, Neider, or the week after, perhaps,” he added, with a reluctant sigh.

“ I shall be sorry to part with you.”

“ The place will give me the horrors now, and I shall never learn to grin at what every fool tells me is fancy, till I’ve settled down in my lonely bachelor’s farm. I wish I could hear of a little place, Cumberland way—there would be a chance of dodging the creeps near you.”

“ Cumberland is a dull place, Grey.”

“ Can’t you sell the farm, and go partners with me in a bigger one in a more cheerful part of England, then ? With your mother for housekeeper, we two old bachelors could get on very well together.”

“ We two old bachelors ! —how soon you settle matters, Grey ”

“ I tell you I shall never marry, and I don’t believe you will.”

“ Why not ? ”

“ You’re too matter-of-fact. A German doll, solid and wooden, that will wear well, and take little impression.”

“ Better so than——”

“ That’s right, old fellow,” cried Grey, seeing that I paused ; “ spare me, now I am down on my back, and clean floored for the nonce.”

“ You’ll go quietly to bed now, Grey ? ”

“ Well, it will not mend matters sitting up.”

And Grey went to bed, and slept restlessly that night, and once cried out in his sleep, “ I shan’t forget her ! ” and so kept me restless too.

His was a strange contrast to the passion of Nicholas Thirsk. I thought that night that there was little doubt where the truest love and the most unselfish thoughts were.

## CHAPTER XI.

## MY MISSION.

THE cottage of Peter Ricksworth, black sheep, nestled in a hollow at the back of the village—a rickety wooden edifice, standing alone in its glory, and therefore convenient to society in general, which escaped the many oaths that rolled forth from open door and window at all hours of the day and night. A cottage where Peter Ricksworth spent most of those hours not devoted to the tap-room of the “Haycock Inn,” very much in the way within doors, and far from an ornament without, with a bent hat cocked on one side of his head, and a grimy black pipe in his mouth.

Peter Ricksworth scarcely did a stroke of honest work from year's end to year's end; a man with a worse character could not have been found in any village within fifty miles of Welsdon in the Woods. A man more often drunk from money he had stolen from his wife's hard earnings, more often disputatious and villainously quarrelsome, more often locked up for breaking the peace and other people's heads, it would have been impossible to find.

There was not a tradesman in the village, a farmer or landowner beyond it, that would not have shrunk from engaging Peter Ricksworth; only in the harvest time, when hands were scarce, and every day the corn lay in the fields there were many hundred pounds at stake, he found a job occasionally, and cut slices out of some one with his reaping-hook. But of late he had done nothing, and still lived, and save looking a trifle more lank and gaunt, was the same Peter Ricksworth who had been a nuisance to the village from the time he took to drinking, fifteen years ago. Rumour said that his wife had driven him to it by her unsociability and eternal preaching, worrying, and discomfort—but Peter Ricksworth had not required driving, and had gone his “wilful gait” with perfect ease. Rumour said also that he lived now by poaching on the Freemantle preserves, and snaring rabbits and hares in the warrens of the

landed gentry; and rumour was true in this respect, and did him no injustice.

Still this busy rumour, that has much to say of all of us, and says little that is true and just, gave him credit for no virtue, and cast no light upon the rugged character living at Welsdon's End. Nothing was known of the intense affection for the only one who tried to cast a ray of comfort in his way—of the father's love for the child of his miserable union. An affection that was, on the whole, undemonstrative, and but exhibited itself when a word was said against her; that was reciprocated by her, who saw how every man's back was turned against her father, and knew alone of all the world the tortuous way to that man's better nature.

I found the cottage solely occupied by Mrs. Ricksworth—a fortunate occurrence, as I deemed, for the disposal of Mr. Genny's two pounds—and Mrs. Ricksworth in pattens at the door, washing sundry garments in an immense tub, that necessitated a "header" of the good lady's every time the soap was in demand.

"Good-morning, Mrs. Ricksworth."

"Good-morning to you," with a critical glance from each side of her hooked nose. "You're from the farm?"

I answered in the affirmative.

"I saw you last night with the others. Is there any news?"

"Mr. Genny wished me to call. He is rather uneasy about his niece, Mercy."

"Ah! she's a fool, maybe, and blind to her own interest."

"She spoke of seeking a situation in London, and he thought if she would accept a couple of sovereigns—"

"She'd fling it in his face, more likes than not. She's getting more like her father every day, I fear. I'm sure I've worked hard, and loved my Bible, and done my best; but it's all agin' me still."

The voice was not musical, or despondent—but there was a hidden pathos even in its harshness. She had done her best, but it was not given her to know when was the best time, the fairest opportunity, and so had seen her work spoil. There are many like her amongst the medley of human life in which we move.

“Mr. Genny, being doubtful if Mercy would accept the gift, has left it to me to place the amount at your disposal. You might take care of it, and offer it as from yourself—or it might help to lessen the expenses incurred by her present stay with you.”

“He’s very good, and he’s a rich man, who can afford the money. Where is it?”

And her cold grey eyes looked towards my hand that held the gift. I placed it within her horny palm, after she had wiped it carefully with her checked apron. She looked very much like her brother, as she turned the money slowly in her hands.

“I’ll hide it in the old chaney tea-pot, I’m thinking,” she said; and then turning to me, “and tell Matthew it shall all be spent on the girl, whether she leaves home or not—every farthing of it.”

“Is it likely she will go to London, do you think?”

“I don’t know—I’m not in her confidence—she tells me nothing. If her mind is set on going, she will go.”

“I am sorry to hear that she is headstrong.”

“I don’t see that it matters to you,” she returned, with a curious stare over the tub at me; “but perhaps it’s a compliment, which don’t suit me, for I’ve no taste for it. She’s a good girl in her way, not a mother’s girl—that luck worn’t to be expected.”

She went into the room, and proceeded to dispose of her unlooked-for acquisition in a secret receptacle, whilst I retraced my way to the farm.

Twenty yards from Ricksworth’s cottage, I came upon Peter Ricksworth and his daughter—a fair picture of “Beauty and the Beast”—arm-in-arm together.

Mr. Ricksworth’s eyes widened a little at my appearance in the green lanes, so close to his house; his daughter affected not to see me.

“Good for the een to see one of Mr. Genny’s fine gentlemen nigh us,” said he, at the top of his voice, as usual; “you’ve brought a message from the farmer?”

Seeing that I hesitated, he said,

“And something more than a message, mayhap; for there be times after harvest when an odd pound can be screwed out of old Genny.”

"I came with an inquiry from Mr. Genny."

"What was that?" and Mercy looked up for the first time.

"He wished to ask if you really intended to go to London."

"We're all going to London to make our fortun's," said Ricksworth; "open a beer shop, p'raps, with me to do the cellar work, and Mercy the barmaid business, and the old woman to see nobody don't pay twice."

"Father, we can do something better than jest at our ill luck," and Mercy passed on with her parent, who muttered,

"Right again, my girl, and so we can. Dashed if you ain't always right, my pretty face!"

I was some two or three hundred yards further on my way when Mercy Ricksworth overtook me.

"I have come back to ask you a question—one or two," she said, speaking very rapidly. "My uncle sent you here with something more than an inquiry?"

"He is not unwilling to take you into his service, Mercy, if——"

"That will do," she interrupted. "I don't wish to hear the conditions—I never desired to become his servant. There is one niece too many already at Follingay farm," she added, with a little natural jealousy.

I say natural jealousy, for Harriet Genny was not more closely allied to the farmer than the girl at my side, and one was her uncle's confidant and housekeeper—perhaps his heiress—and the other had been refused a dairymaid's place. It seemed unfair, at first sight, though no man in the world is expected to support *all* his nephews and nieces.

"Do you bring a message from anyone else?" she asked.

She looked so steadily at me that I coloured.

"I have not seen Miss Genny this——"

"Don't prevaricate—you know I don't allude to my cousin, and I'm not ashamed to say whom I mean. Have you brought a message from William Grey, Sir?"

"Had I done so I should have delivered it," was my reply.

"William Grey is one who could not keep a secret for his life's sake. He has told you all; I can read it all upon your face."

“You are a shrewd physiognomist.”

“And he is a babbler—a poor weak babbler, that is not deserving of a thought.”

Her contemptuous manner irritated me.

“I am afraid that you do not understand him.”

“He is easy to read, too.”

“His true heart and his deep feelings are not easily understood or appreciated, nevertheless.”

“You are his friend?”

“I am proud to say I am.”

“And he has told you of—of a very silly wish of his?”

“I see no reason to deny it. He has.”

“And is it possible—do you really think that he is grieving for me, the daughter of Peter Ricksworth?”

“It is more than possible.”

“Tell him not to grieve,” she cried impetuously, “he will be a fool all his life to give a second thought concerning me. Tell him I never loved him, thought of him—tell him I hated him, if it will drive me out of his thoughts. You men have a way of consoling each other for imaginary trials.”

“He will recover, Mercy, in good time.”

“To be sure,” she continued, in the same wild tone. “I should be sorry to think he would not recover. If he should speak of me again, tell him that my girlish folly and vanity—I was only sixteen—has been the cause of this, and that I am very, very sorry for it. Tell him, too, that I was sorry directly I saw how far it had led him, and how I did my best to check him, and show him what a poor girl I was, and quite unworthy of him. I was his best friend after all.”

I regarded her with surprise.

“I knew what was best for him. If I had loved him, I could have but brought him disgrace and shame; and he would have soon tired of me; and—and—as I did *not* love him—please tell him that, Sir—I did not sink my chance of happiness with his own for the sake of being a farmer’s wife.”

“Your refusal is creditable to you, Mercy,” said I. “Many girls in your position would have tried very hard to secure William Grey for a husband.”

"Do you taunt me with my position, too?" and she drew herself up haughtily.

"I hope you think more worthily of me than that. I did not imply a taunt—I am sorry that you fancy my words conveyed one."

"I am inclined to judge hastily—forgive me, Sir. I am a young woman alone in the world, striving hard to do my duty. I am desolate, and in trouble."

"Mercy Ricksworth!"

I turned suddenly upon her, but she was hurrying back towards her home. I made one step towards her, but she waved me back with a quick hand, and a look on her face that offered a faint resemblance to her father's.

It was a look that checked my progress, and dismissed a doubt which had crept to my mind whilst she was speaking. Wayward and ungovernable as she appeared, I thought that William Grey had had a lucky escape, and that the first disappointment was, after all, the best. Every step that took me further from Welsdon's End strengthened me in that conviction.

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## CHAPTER XII.

HARRIET GENNY was awaiting my arrival at the farm-house. Her uncle and Mr. Grey had gone over the land, and she was there alone to confront me. She was looking pale and ill that morning.

"My uncle tells me that you have been to my aunt's—to the Ricksworths'," she said, seeing that the relationship puzzled me for the moment.

"Yes."

"With two sovereigns for Mercy," she said, a little scornfully.

"Yes."

“And she took them?”

“For the present she knows nothing about them—I have left them with her mother.”

“You are becoming quite a go-between, Mr. Neider,” was her next remark, which brought the blood to my cheeks.

“I was asked to accept the mission as a favour—and I accepted it, Miss Genny.”

“And forestalled me?”

“I beg your pardon—I was not aware——”

“You are aware of nothing, but that which is brought in capital letters before your eyes,” she interrupted, crossly; “did it not strike you, at least, that I might take an interest, even as a cousin, in Mercy Ricksworth?”

“I can but say I did not think of it.”

“Did you think that I could not understand one whose nature is similar to mine—whom I would love as a dear young sister, if she turned not disdainfully away from me? Have I so much to endear me to this house, that my heart cannot yearn to that girl, and sympathise with her, and understand her? If I never had a sister of my own, it is the more reason that I would go far to make her like one!”

She was rebelling against the loneliness of her life, the unnaturalness of her position there, the want of sympathy and love to be found within the farm-house walls. I could see it then, and I knew that last night’s quarrel with her uncle had helped to disturb the too even tenor of her way.

“Tell me the result of your mission,” she demanded; and I was too much her servant in my heart to disguise it, had there even been a reason for so doing. I kept back my interview with Mercy—it was another story in which Grey played the principal part, and I had no right to allude, in any way, to *that*.

The story ended, she walked away from me without another word, and left me to proceed to my day’s work.

In the evening she made her appearance in the parlour, equipped for a journey.

“I am going to the Ricksworths,” she said to her uncle, who was studying his banker’s cheque-book.

“Ay, lass, as ye will,” said he, strangely humble.

After the storm was over, Genny was invariably sorry for

his differences with his favourite niece—and that particular evening he would not have objected to anything.

“It’s late, Miss Genny,” I ventured to say; “surely you will not think of proceeding that distance alone, at so late an hour?”

“I am not afraid of the dark, Sir—and I am too well known to be hurt.”

“If you would allow me to accompany you as far as the cottage,” I suggested.

“Ay—it’s as well,” added Genny, “there are queer characters about, now the race toime draws near—if ye don’t moind Mr. Grey or Neider, Harriet?”

Harriet turned quickly to Mr. Grey, who sat poring over a book, with a weary expression of countenance.

“I won’t deprive Mr. Neider of the pleasure,” said Grey, and Harriet frowned at him for his politeness.

There was nothing left but to accept my escort, unless Miss Genny wished to create a disturbance concerning a common act of courtesy; and shortly afterwards we were in the dark road, along which I had walked with Nicholas Thirsk last night.

Harriet Genny was a good walker, and went along at a rapid pace, declining the offer of my arm with a politeness so cold, that it had the reverse effect of making my blood boil. All the way there she declined to discuss any topic whatsoever, and few and far between were the monosyllables with which she responded to my artfully directed queries. And all my questions concerned Mercy Ricksworth, in whom I knew now she took no common interest.

Before the cottage, which I had visited that morning.

“Will you wait here, Mr. Neider? I presume you have no wish to protect me from the danger that may beset me inside the house?”

“I will wait here, if you please.”

And in no very amiable mood I waited for Harriet Genny, and wandered to and fro in the dark road, and listened to the rustle-rustle of the autumn leaves, and thought, take it all together, what a very cut-throat place it looked by starlight. It was a long conference; I heard the clock in Welsdon church tower chime the half-hour past eight, the three-quarters, strike nine, chime

the quarter past. I began to have a dim suspicion, at last, that Harriet Genny had passed out by a side door through a lane at the back, and gone on her way alone in defiance of my politeness—which suspicion became finally so strong, that I stepped over the palings and across the patch of garden ground, with the intention of peeping through the lattice window, whence the light shone, the only sign of life before me.

It was very undignified, but my temper was aroused—there was a dogged, obstinate, pig-headed mood, to which I was subject at times—and I had an extreme objection to Harriet Genny stealing a march upon me. So I stooped and peered over Mrs. Ricksworth's window-blind.

My suspicions were confirmed; there were only two inmates in that room—Mercy Ricksworth and her mother; and there were three doors to the room—four or five, perhaps, for the place looked all doors. Mercy Ricksworth sat on a chair by a feeble flickering fire, nursing her chin with one hand, and rocking herself slowly to and fro; Mrs. Ricksworth was ironing at a table, her mob-cap coming so near the candle every moment, that, had I been less excited, my fears would have been aroused lest she should set her head on fire. Whilst I made quite sure that Harriet Genny was not in a remote corner of the room, I heard Mercy say,

“I thought she was a proud and upstart woman, and fancied herself above me. I've been wrong there.”

“You're always wrong, I'm inclined to fancy.”

“Well, I owned that I was wrong.”

“And you were as rude as ever owning it—like your wicked father.”

“Do leave him alone, just a minute, mother.”

“You take after him more every day.”

“Ah! talk about *me*!”

“And he hasn't his equal in the town, and we haven't heard the worst of him yet, and—ya-a-ah!” screamed Mrs. Ricksworth, catching sight of my white face pressed against the glass, and dropping her flat iron in dismay, “here's the devil come to fetch him before his time.”

Mercy started up, and I beat a hasty retreat over the palings, and along the road. I heard the latch click, and

the door open, but I was out of visual range by that time, and speeding on to the farm. I knew where the narrow lane at the back of Genny's cottage met the high-road again, and I made all haste towards it, and ran almost head-first into the pit of Peter Ricksworth's stomach.

"Cuss it ! young earthquake, do you want to bust a man ?" he bawled ; " who the devil are you, knocking against honest men in the dark, and scaring all their wits away ? "

And he leaned against the hedgerow to recover his breath.

" I beg pardon—but I was in a great hurry, and I wished to overtake Miss Genny."

" She's a little way ahead—I suspected it was my fine madam, by her drawing her dress closer to her, as though I was coming along the high-road full-blown with the small-pox. Or," he said, after a pause, " she might have thought me drunk, not knowing that I have promised Mercy to keep sober as a judge this side of the race week. Not t'other side, you know," and by the starlight I could see the ruffian winking at me. " Lord love her, I couldn't promise her so much as that ! "

" Good-night to you."

" I was about to ax you what's become of Mr. Thirsty."

" If you mean Mr. Thirsk, he's gone to London."

" After Robin Genny, and both at their old tricks again by this time—the dare-devils ! "

" Good-night to you—good-night."

" Oh ! good-night to you," he growled ; " I'd been a mightier sight more civil, if I had doubled up a gentleman with *my* bullet-head."

I was on my way again, anathematising the delay. I ran through the village at a rattling pace, to the amazement of the few tradesfolk putting up their shutters, and to the exasperation of a small dog that ran barking at my heels, till I turned round and kicked him.

At the other extremity of the village, and in the green lanes again, I came up with Harriet Genny.

" Why, you must have missed me, Mr. Neider," she said, in the most innocent and aggravating manner.

" Missed you, Miss Genny—I—"

She had struggled hard with her powers of composure ; but my heated face, shortness of breath, and indignant looks were too much for her, and she burst into a musical peal of laughter, that first rendered me more indignant and then made me laugh too. It was so seldom that she laughed, and it stood in this instance evidence of so keen an enjoyment, that I could but soften and laugh with her. And thus we became very good friends again.

“ You see I have reached here without molestation from the tramps on their way to the races,” she said ; “ it was a matter of dispute between us whether country roads were safe, I think ? ”

Her petulance had vanished, and she was in one of her happiest moods—the moods lying so few and far between, that I would not have disturbed them by a word. Surely she was born to be a happier, brighter woman, had the force of circumstances set not too strongly against her.

“ I’m as variable as a March month, Mr. Neider ; I came out like a lion, and am going home like a lamb.”

“ A frank confession.”

“ I feel really in high spirits to-night, however,” she explained ; “ I could sing along the high-road.”

“ Is it fair to ask the reason for the change ? ”

“ Oh ! you noticed the stormy character of the early portion of this evening ? ”

“ Ahem—I fancied it was a little cloudy.”

“ Candidly, am I not the worst-tempered woman whom you have ever met ? ”

“ Candidly—no.”

“ Tell me of the ogress who surpassed me ? ”

“ You have not answered my question yet.”

“ The reason for the change in me. Why, the great discovery that I had been misunderstood, and that amidst all Mercy’s foolish jealousy there was a great deal of love for me at the bottom of her heart,” replied Harriet ; “ and it was very pleasant to make the discovery, though she owned it with her old ungraciousness. Why, it’s not such a sombre-tinted world after all ! Perhaps I shall not always be in russet brown, and with a sad and woe-begone countenance. For I *was* very light-hearted once, until some began to misunderstand me, and others to torture me, and

others to hold me in eternal suspense. And some day, God willing, it may all be bright again—I can believe it will to-night. Why, I shall be going to the races next!"

"I hope so."

"Why do you hope so?"

"Because it would be very hard to leave you alone in the farm-house."

"Oh! I'm used to that—and I don't like races."

"I was hopeful that you would—just for once—have accepted my escort, if only for the little amends you owe me for running away to-night."

"I have never cared for races, although my uncle has pressed me every year to accompany him. Besides—"

"What?"

"Oh! nothing;" and I could see her colour as plainly by the friendly stars as I had seen Peter Ricksworth wink a quarter of an hour before.

"You will not go, then?"

"If my uncle accompanies us, perhaps I will."

"Say you will."

"How you bother, to be sure!"

"Well, say you will. It's the first and last time I shall ever have the pleasure of sharing your holiday—a year's pupilage will have passed before the races come round again."

"I had forgotten."

"Am I to hear you say 'yes'?"

"Oh!—yes, then."

Talk about happiness that night, I could have danced a fandango under the starlit heavens, or flung somersaults, or sang comic songs. I was all happiness, and prepared for any extravagance. My heart was full; I was choking in the throat—there was an electric fluid running in every vein of my body. And how sweetly the "yes" had sounded—despite her feigned indifference to the question—and how beautiful she looked!

"Mind the road here, Miss Genny," I said, with great solicitude; "they have been shooting stones down to-day—will you take my arm just here?"

And she placed her hand upon my arm at once, and my heart began to thump again strangely—and it was dream-

land once more, and I a figure wandering in it, dreaming within the dream that made me happy.

It was but a short way to the farm; the late moon was beginning to peer over the roof that was close at hand. And at every step my heart beat so hard that I was afraid she would hear it.

“On the wane,” I murmured, almost involuntarily.

“What, the moon?”

“No, the happy days here—the year of my apprenticeship, wherein I have made one or two friends, I hope.”

“What a number!”

“If they are true ones, it is sufficient. Miss Genny, I count you amongst my friends—am I precipitate?”

She gave a startled look into my face, and then answered in a voice that trembled,

“I don’t bear you a great deal of malice.”

“I wonder if you will be sorry to see the back of me—if, after I am gone, you will ever——”

“I shall be gone first.”

“Miss Genny!”

Her face was very pale now, and her voice had a strange ring in it.

“I shall be gone first, perhaps,” said she; “talking of goings and comings has brought me back to a strange world—and I had forgotten it.”

“Going away!—when?”

“Don’t ask me—I don’t know.”

“But, Miss Genny—dear Miss Genny.”

“Let go my hand, Sir!—how dare you so forget yourself?—how dare——”

She had wrenched her hand from my nervous clutch, and had dashed towards the farm-gate, which she shook wildly, in a vain effort to open. I was at her side again.

“Miss Genny, I have said too much, or too little. Miss Harriet, dear Harriet, I must tell you all. If you will only——”

“Mr. Neider,” turning towards me, and speaking very calmly and distinctly, “you have said too much, and startled my confidence and trust in you. God knows what I have said or done to lead you on; and God forgive me if by a word or look I have encouraged in you any thought of me.

Will you forget all this?—oh! will you promise for ever to forget this?"

"Miss Genny—I will try!"

A moment afterwards we entered the farm-house parlour together.



## CHAPTER XIII.

### TRAMLINGFORD RACES.

TRAMLINGFORD race-course was situated some seven miles and a half from Welsdon in the Woods, and about a mile and a quarter from the ancient town of Tramlingford. A time-honoured institution was Tramlingford races, and well patronised by the nobility, gentry, and public in general, as the circulars say. Patronised, to a certain extent, under difficulties, for it always rained Tramlingford race week, and, save the few canvas booths, and the two race stands, there was little chance of shelter in the neighbourhood. More than once attempts had been made to dodge the weather, by shifting it to late in August instead of late in September, but the wet season shifted also, and the rain came down all the more violently for the attempt to take advantage of it.

It was a curious inconsistency of human nature, that all race-goers made sure of fine weather year after year, and even started with great faith in it, and were invariably caught, on the road to Tramlingford, by opposing elements.

And this Tramlingford race week in particular, that came round during my stay at the Follingay farm—wherein I had begun to live and learn what life was—set in no more favourably than its predecessors, and we left Welsdon in the Woods under gloomy auspices.

Mr. Genny's dog-cart was turned out for the occasion, and William Grey and I sat behind, whilst the farmer and his niece took the front seat—the farmer driving.

Harriet Genny had kept her promise, and there she was

by the side of her uncle, in her quiet grey-silk holiday dress. Since that night when her mood had been so varied, and ended so strangely and sadly for myself, she had never spoken of her promise. The night preceding the great gathering of the county, she had expressed a wish to accompany her uncle, and he, surprised at the suggestion, could but say "Ay," and assent.

We were very good friends now, Harriet Genny and I ; but it was a friendship distinct from anything that had gone before, that kept me at a distance, and burnt me up with fever. Towards me there were no longer those varied moods that I had thought very trying to the temper, and that I knew now had had a charm to lure the best feelings of my heart away. Before the night on which I had betrayed myself, she had been capricious, excitable and abrupt ; succeeding that period there had been one even current, which there was no disturbing or resisting. It carried me away, despite myself, and set me at a distance from her ; after that there were no half confidences, no more little quarrels that required explanation and—forgiveness ! She might have been a sister, who loved and pitied me for an infirmity under which I laboured, she was so gentle in her manners. It was as if she were striving to make amends for something which had deceived me ; it was a pitying gentleness, that galled me and rendered me unhappy. Still, there was no fighting against it, and my efforts to bring her back to her old self were as futile as though I had attempted to bring back last year's spring.

And it was all my own fault—I knew that, I felt all that ; I should have waited for a better time, and kept my lips sealed, and my heart closed. At the best, I was but a friend of a few months, and had no right to dash hastily forward with professions that could but naturally alarm her.

"God knows what I have said or done to lead you on," she had said, when first aroused to all that she had given birth to in my heart, and her voice faltered, and the tears were in her eyes. She could feel for my distress, but she could not love me in return, and, like William Grey, I must live my passion down.

So it was a party not the most hilarious that was proceeding to Tramlingford Heath in search of a day's amuse-

ment—three out of the four were at least of a thoughtful turn, and Mr. Genny was grim and stern, and cut somewhat spitefully at his horse's ears. Even Ipps, jogging on the old mare in advance, appeared to have caught the infection, or have fallen asleep on the way, he hung his head so low.

The heavy banks of clouds that had been rising from the west were now gathering over the whole sky, and one or two heavy rain-drops warned us of the first shower. Grey and I spread a second rug over our knees, and buttoned our great-coats to the chin—Genny struggled to fix his chaise umbrella—Harriet drew her shawl closer round her and shivered.

“It is a miserable day,” she murmured; “if I were of a superstitious turn of mind, I should fancy something was going to happen.”

“Ay—and I’m darmed if it woan’t be the horrors,” said Genny; “’pon my soul, I never went to the races with such a dead-and-alive lot in my life !”

“Oh ! it’s the wet weather,” cried Grey, who took the hint to himself; “we shall have these heavy winds, and these heavy showers, all day—and it’s up-hill work to be jolly in the midst of them.”

“I wonder if Sir Richard Freemantle will be on the course,” said Harriet, starting a topic of her own.

“I hope so,” said her uncle.

“Do you wish to see him, uncle ?”

“Ay.”

Harriet looked at Mr. Genny, but he did not appear inclined to offer any explanation, and when she had given up the thought of it his answer came.

“I said the foirst time I saw Sir Richard I’d put a question to him, for my own credit’s sake, if not for my niece Mercy’s—and I’ll keep my word, moind ye. I always do.”

“But Sir Richard will not like——”

“Darm his loikes !” ejaculated Genny; “is he to take awa’ a girl’s character in a breath, without gieing a cause for such a thing ? Not if he were twenty baronets.—Coom up !”

“He’ll forestall me,” muttered Grey.

"Why, you don't think of anything half so foolish, Grey," I said, lowering my voice.

"Ah! but I do."

"This is sheer folly."

"Hasn't he made half Welsdon rail against as good and virtuous a girl as ever breathed?"

"He may answer Mr. Genny, but he will not see any sufficient cause to explain to you, I think," I said; "nay more, you will only complicate matters, offend Mercy Ricks-worth, and be no nearer your end."

"I have a right, as an honest man, to deliver him a piece of my mind," said Grey; "what do you think I am going to Tramlingford races for?"

"To keep me company. You and I may never spend a holiday together again, if you think of leaving us three weeks hence for good."

"For good or bad—which, Nieder?"

"For good, to be sure. Yours is a nature that will always find good in the world."

"Well, I hope so. How am I looking?"

"You're becoming as rosy as the morn again."

"Do you think," in a lower whisper still, "I am learning to forget *her*?"

"You say you never forget."

"Exactly. If you speak of her twenty years hence, I shall tell you that the romance of my life—my little romance in one chapter—has not died out. I shall be—I almost am now—resigned to the life she has crossed, but I shall always think of her faithfully. Your maxim is that men can shake off these crosses."

"No."

I had begun to think after his fashion, though I did not care to own it then—I knew there was one near me whom I should not readily forget.

"But I shan't fret my way through life, Nieder," he said, slapping me suddenly on the knee, with a forced rush of spirits that nearly tilted me out of the trap; "snivelling never did good to mortal, and I won't be one of Genny's 'dead-and-alive lot.' Hurrah for the races! I wish I had a post-horn and a pasteboard nose!"

He cheered up amazingly after this, and exchanged un-

complimentary chaff with the few farmers and villagers proceeding in our direction, and brought a less severe expression to the countenance of Mr. Genny, who laid his thoughts of Sir Richard on the shelf for awhile.

"If this be my last appearance in public, the public shall have no reason to complain of my deficiencies."

"And you'll leave Sir Richard to Genny?"

"Perhaps I will," said he; "and if I do, I'll spend the day looking my gentleman up, till Genny can fix him. Here's the rain leaving off again, and we shall have a jolly day after all. And here's the turn in the road that meets the road from Tramlingford, and all the Tramlingfordians."

"And here's the carriage of Sir Richard Freemantle rattling up behind us," said I.

"By George!—so it is!"

"Ay!—what's that?" said Genny, turning round. "Freemantle's carriage cooming? I'll wait for him here, then, and stroike while the iron's hot. There'll be nothing unpleasant then on the coorse."

"Uncle, you will never be so ridiculous," said Harriet, almost fiercely.

"Ay!" answered Genny, enigmatically.

He drew the dog-cart a little aside, and was proceeding at a slower pace, when the carriage of the Freemantles, with four horses and two post-boys, swirled by at a rapid rate. It was a half-open carriage containing two ladies and two gentlemen—the lady on our side being the Miss Freemantle who had given me a missive one night to Nicholas Thirsk. The hood of the carriage sheltered Miss Freemantle and her companion from the passing showers; Sir Richard and his friend sat with their backs to the horses, under an umbrella—Sir Richard looking weary, almost miserable. Genny instinctively touched his hat to his landlord, and Sir Richard, with military precision, returned the compliment; and then the carriage and four were a long way ahead of us, and Mr. Genny's demands postponed for the present.

"I'll be doon on him yet," muttered Genny, as we turned the bend of the road after the carriage.

"I should have thought Sir Richard's tastes would have led him to eschew horse-racing," I observed to Grey.

"They're tetchy people about here," remarked Grey; "if the great guns of the county stop away, there are fifty people to take offence at it, not to mention the 'Tramlingford Scarifier'; and to avoid all this Sir Richard brings his death's-head and cross-bones to the gathering. I was here last year, and he sat in a corner of the grand stand fast asleep, whilst the cup was run for—he's a fishy being, and a rare dull life his sister must have of it."

"She looked dull enough, poor thing!"

"Poor thing!—with goodness knows how much money waiting for her in the Tramlingford bank, when she comes of age!" cried Grey.

"She may be pitied for all that."

"Well, she may if you like—I have no objection. And here's the glorious waterworks again. Look out, Mr. Genny!"

"Ay! lad."

And extra wrappers were on, and the chaise umbrella re-erected, before the heavy sheets of rain came down again; it was in this fashion, and under these damp circumstances, we drove on to Tramlingford race-course. Mr. Genny was an economic man and objected to grand stands; he paid a shilling or eighteen pence for the horse and trap to pass into an inner space by the side of the course—they did not exact Derby prices in that part of Merry England—and the horse was placed in charge of a black-haired, gipsy-looking scamp, and the trap wedged amongst the chaises, broughams, and carts already there.

Mr. Genny and Mr. Grey were shaking hands with half-a-dozen farmers from the Welsdon neighbourhood in an instant, and Harriet sat under the chaise umbrella, pale, thoughtful and cold.

"I fear you are not likely to receive much enjoyment this miserable day, Miss Genny," I said.

"I did not expect to enjoy myself, Mr. Neider," said she; "but it was a promise, and you would not relieve me from it."

"Miss Genny, I would have relieved you from it in an instant, had I known—had I thought—"

"Yes," she interrupted, "I am aware of that, but my

uncle was anxious that I should avail myself of this general holiday."

"I am afraid that you will get wet here."

"Oh! no, I am well wrapped up."

"You must come into the stand—this is no place for you."

"I am quite content where I am," she said, with the faintest flash of her past acerbity. I was pleased to hear it, as I should have been to have heard one of her rare musical laughs—it was like the old times coming back again!

"Am I not to be trusted now?" I said.

"I would trust you with my life, Mr. Neider," she said, "if there was a necessity for bestowing upon you so important a charge. But I would prefer to keep of one party, and I think my uncle would also prefer to remain where he is."

I did not press the point—something in her voice told me how firm she would be if I persisted. I was standing on the moist turf, looking up at the sky, and trying to imagine it was coming down less fast, when she suddenly said:—

"I shall want you to do me a favour, Mr. Neider."

"Willingly," I said with eagerness.

"I am desirous of forestalling my uncle with Sir Richard Freemantle. If any questions are to be asked, and answers expected, I may be the better able to put the first and procure the last—and Mercy is my cousin, in whom I take an interest. Will you look round the course presently, and let me know whether Sir Richard is keeping to his carriage, and where the carriage is situated?"

"I will go now."

"Thank you."

I set forth alone, after getting on to the race-course, where there were a few promenaders, as defiant of the elements as myself. The prospect that lay before me did not conduce to any great degree of exhilaration—the day was unpropitious, and the rain fell heavily. It was the Derby day seen through a diminishing glass, and under adverse circumstances. There was a busy crowd of betting men in the open space before the rickety, draughty wooden building

termed the grand stand, and these men gave life and animation to the scene, by shouting under their umbrellas their two's and three's to one on the favourites or against the favourites of the day, and hanging over the palings in earnest confabulation with soft countrymen, who listened to their seductive voices, accepted their bets, and paid over *their* stakes, with a faith in human nature, and in the honesty of betting men, wonderful to witness. There were one or two refreshment booths and gingerbread stalls at the back of the stand, filled with people standing up for the rain ; and there were some thimble-riggers doing a very bad business with their confederates, and endeavouring vainly to lure the British public into the wet, by the seeming ease with which they lost their money. Boys and dogs were plentiful ; countrymen in smock frocks, and countrymen's wives in their Sunday best,—“tucked, oh ! ever so high,”—splashed and paddled about the wet grass, and did their best to enjoy themselves in the face of an adverse fate.

I had no difficulty in discovering the whereabouts of Sir Richard Freemantle—there were only three carriages with attendant post-boys on the course, and Sir Richard's was at the back of the grand stand, and unoccupied. Making use of Grey's race-glass I had not much trouble to discover Sir Richard and his party on the first floor of the grand stand ; they were all gazing ruefully at the damp world beneath them, and at the post in front, from which a cracked bell began at that moment dolefully to ring.

The first race was coming off, and the rural constabulary,—shivering young men in white trowsers, and with shiny capes much too small for them,—mustered in force to clear the course and make themselves generally useful. Turning to retrace my steps, I ran against Peter Ricksworth, who was standing immediately behind me, gaping up at the grand stand.

“Would you mind lending me your spy-glass for a moment, Mr. Neider ?”

“Certainly not, Mr. Ricksworth.”

“I shan't run away with it, or pawn it and raise money on it, or pass it on to a friend, and swear you never lent it

to me," said he, taking the race-glass I proffered him ; "I am an honest man, and bear the best of characters. Thank'ee."

He turned the race-glass the reverse way, and looked through it at the stand, reversed it again, and cursed it for being misty, and then all manner of colours ; finally fixing the focus to his satisfaction, stood glaring through the glass with great apparent interest, until one of the constabulary touched him on the shoulder, and reminded him politely that the course was being cleared, and that the first race was coming off directly.

Ricksworth turned round with a formidable scowl.

"Can't a man admire the pick o' the company without you stepping in to worry, jackanapes ?"

"Now, Ricksworth, my man, get off the course."

"Your man be damned !" said Ricksworth. "I'm not your man."

"You were once," said the constable, with a grin.

"Ah ! and a rare broken head or two there was to make me—I owe you one for your share in it to this day, Joe Barclay."

"Come, get off the course."

"Can't me and my friend stand here a moment without your jaw ?" cried the irascible Peter. "How do you know we don't belong to the grand stand ?"

"Go in it, then, and look sharp !"

"I found a couple of sovereigns in an old chaney tea-pot this morning, and can afford to swell it, if I loike. Don't you think I haven't money to play the bloater, because I have !"

"Clear the course—clear the course !"

"Will you oblige me with my glass, Ricksworth ?" I suggested.

"Let's have another squint through it first," he said ; "where's that ugly white-faced devil that robbed my darter of her good name ? I'd give my yellow boys to have him by his throat."

"Clear the course ?"

"Hould yer jaw, Joe Barclay, or I'll crack it for you."

"CLEAR THE COURSE !" roared Joe, laying his white-

gloved hand on Ricksworth's shoulder. Ricksworth struck at it savagely with the opera-glass, and turned round with the face of a demon.

"Hollo, Peter!—if you ride rusty, you'll be in Tramlingford gaol to-night—so move on."

"I'll see you——"

"Ricksworth, are you mad or drunk?" I shouted. "Give me the glass, and go your way quietly."

"It's good advice, and I'll take it for once," said Ricksworth, thrusting the opera-glass into my hands and striding towards the opposite side of the course, where the people were collecting. I found my way, with difficulty, to the Genny equipage, where, to my surprise, I found that a tall, round-shouldered being, in a cut-away plaid coat and white hat, had been added to the party.

The heavy showers had abated by this time, and there was only a steady natural rain now, which soaked one gradually through, and afforded no hopes of clearing up. The rain streamed from the points of the newcomer's umbrella on to his plaid trowsers.

"Here be Mr. Neider," said Genny, "the gentleman I was speaking of just now. Mr. Neider, this is my nephew, Mr. Robin Genny."

And in Mr. Robin Genny I recognised the gentleman who had walked back with Thirsk to the "Haycock Inn," in the early times before the days of farming. I had leisure to study him, after he had shaken hands with me in a very friendly manner—to see, for the first time in my life, a real anthon in the flesh.

He was a man who had worked hard, and had seen a great deal of life—there was no mistaking those sunken eyes and high cheek bones, that waxen countenance, and the "score" that Time had run up thereon in innumerable fine lines. It was the face of one who had aged before his time; study, fast-living, or a weak constitution, separately, would not have given such a look—together it was natural enough. It was a face that changed its expression very suddenly—at one moment it was an intellectual face, at another a gloomy one, in a third it wore a mocking, reckless air, that reminded me of Thirsk—and there was a fourth expression, a gay, laughing, and frank one, which on that

holiday occasion, and in defiance of the rain, was chiefly predominant.

He was standing in the trap, under the chaise umbrella, and hoped that he was not depriving me of my place, which he was, though I begged him not to disturb himself, which he did not. He had been cutting some slips of card up, for an amateur sweepstake at one shilling per member, and Mr. Genny had subscribed thereto with considerable reluctance, having to pay for himself and his niece also. He was in excellent spirits, and anxious to bet Mr. Grey, or anyone that might feel inclined, any amount on certain horses, whose names he had ticked off on the race-card.

“Ye be as free and as foolish with your mooney as ever, Robin,” commented Genny.

“It’s only a little amusement, suitable to time and place, uncle,” said his nephew, laughing; “and I’ve been in luck’s way lately, and earned lots of the ‘needful.’”

“Keep it for the time when you’ll stray out of the road, Robin,” said Harriet.

“Never again,” he said, quite earnestly.

I fancied that Harriet changed colour, as she replied,

“You have said that half-a-dozen times before.”

“Ah! but the world was against me then, now it is saying what a clever fellow I am. I am clear of the rut, and have struck out a new path for myself.”

“I think I have heard that before, also.”

“What an excellent memory you have, Harriet!”

“I have cause to remember.”

She said it bitterly, I fancied, but it did not appear to convey that impression to Robin Genny, who laughed as at a pleasant jest with which she had favoured him.

“You will see there is such a thing as a new leaf in the life of a reprobate cousin,” said he; “I have run down to Welsdon to tell you all about it. I came here first, where I guessed I should pick up Uncle Matthew, although I little thought of seeing your pretty grave self. There, don’t look so fierce at the remarks of an old friend, Harriet, or I shall begin to wonder what has happened to you.”

He spoke as if he had a right to wonder—as if he knew her so thoroughly and well, that that manner of hers, so

habitual to me, was something new and strange, and calculated to alarm him with its singularity.

The bell opposite the grand stand began to ring again—there was a cry of “They’re off!” a general lowering of umbrellas, a rush by of half-a-dozen race-horses and jockeys, a crowd of people breaking into the course, and Farmer Genny the winner of five shillings.

“Lucky in big and little things, uncle,” said his nephew, “and the money always turning in the right direction.”

“Ay,” returned Genny—“it’s roight for me, at least.”

And he pocketed his five shillings with evident satisfaction.

A few minutes afterwards Mr. Robin Genny and his uncle strolled down the course to see the winner, leaving Mr. Grey and me in attendance on Harriet. Mr. Grey standing moodily under his umbrella, against the shafts of the chaise, gave Harriet the opportunity to ask, in a low voice, if I had discovered Sir Richard Freemantle.

“Yes, he is in the grand stand.”

“He will be on the race-course, presently,” said Harriet, “and will meet my uncle, who, in his hasty moods, may peril his connection with the baronet, and not attain his own ends. Do you mind coming with me?—I am tired of sitting here.”

“It rains as fast as ever.”

“I am not afraid of the rain.”

“I wish you would take shelter in the grand stand, Miss Genny.”

“Thank you. I have already said ‘No’ twice to that.”

I knew who had put the question a second time, but I did not care to mention his name just then.

“Mr. Grey, will you tell my uncle that I shall be back in a few minutes.”

“Certainly,” said Grey, with a jump; “but—but you’ll find the grass very wet.”

“My double soles will resist it,” she replied.

We left Grey looking doubtfully after us, and entering the course we went on with the stream of people towards the grand stand.

I was very glad it rained—there was only one umbrella to share, and she had to take my arm to obtain her fair portion. I was glad to be her confidant in the little matter of Mercy Ricksworth's character, concerning which she was naturally interested. It was a new relation in which I stood to her, and I felt more happy in my mind, and less inclined to see everything in the world under a neutral tint.

"A hasty word of Mr. Genny's—and you know how hasty he can be—might bring a notice to quit from Sir Richard," said Harriet to me; "if I could but tell uncle half-an-hour hence that I have seen the baronet."

"Sir Richard will think it a strange time to be addressed on the topic of a servant's character, I fear."

"He has acted strangely."

The course in the neighbourhood of the grand stand was well thronged—for so rainy a day the natives of the place, and the nomadic tribes, who let not a horse-race escape them, had now mustered in fair force. The betting men were hanging over the fence again, eloquent, husky, and persuasive, and the greed of gain drew many a hard-earned sovereign from scantily-filled pockets.

The noise and confusion appeared to alarm Harriet, whose arm I could feel press mine more closely.

"This is my first and last appearance on such a scene as this," she said, with a little shudder; "is there no escaping this crowd?"

"Not if we wish to discover Sir Richard?"

"Look round with your glass, then."

I did so, turning almost instinctively to the spot where I had seen Sir Richard last. To my own surprise, he was in the same place, and alone. The first floor had become almost empty of its inmates, and he sat shivering where I had last seen him, with the fur collar of his cloak turned up above his ears, and with the most rueful expression on his countenance.

"There's an opportunity of speaking to him now," said she; "I think I will venture, after all. Will you wait for me here, Mr. Neider?"

"No."

She regarded me with surprise.

"I will accompany you. The faces about this stand and enclosure are not such as I should care for you to confront alone."

"You are considerate," she said; "but I am not afraid of them."

"And you'll pardon me, but a lady alone in such a place naturally attracts undue attention. I shall go with you."

"This will be an expensive freak of yours, Mr. Neider."

"Not very."

I paid the fee of five shillings each for admission—there were no guinea admission charges to these small country race-stands—and Harriet was for stopping and repaying me on the spot.

"Miss Genny, time is valuable."

"I shall not allow you to—"

"Miss Genny, you will not lose a chance, now, of giving me pain!"

She coloured, looked angry, and then hastened on again, without replying. We passed through the crowd of betting men to the stand, and up a shaky wooden staircase, to the large breezy room with its open windows, through which the rain and wind came swooping, and out of which one or two idlers were staring.

"It's a strange time," whispered Harriet, as we stood at the door of the room; "but he may return to London to-night, and I—I think that I have a right to speak."

"Shall I wait here for you?"

"Yes, I think—"

Before she could finish the sentence, Sir Richard Freedmantle stood face to face with us.

"Will you allow me to pass, please—I—"

He stopped and glanced from my face to my companion's. A stiff inclination of his head towards me, a raising of his hat to Harriet Genny, and then a movement to descend the stairs.

"One moment, Sir Richard," cried Harriet; "I have come here in search of you. You will allow me to detain you for an instant."

Sir Richard bowed and remained stationary.

"I have chosen an inopportune moment to address

you, Sir Richard," said she ; "but it is the only one available. I wish to speak concerning my cousin Mercy."

He looked bewildered for an instant.

"Ah ! yes ; I had forgotten the relationship, Miss Genny. To be sure, your cousin."

She had made a movement to withdraw apart with him, but Sir Richard did not second her example ; and, on my attempt to leave them together, he said, very quickly,

"Mr. Neider, you need not leave Miss Genny. I have no secret to communicate—I have nothing to say concerning Mercy Ricksworth."

"She left you at a moment's notice, and you refuse to state the reasons for so harsh a measure, Sir !" cried Harriet, indignantly.

"She has not stated those reasons ?" Sir Richard asked, with some anxiety.

"She has not."

"Neither can I, Miss Genny," he replied, austerely. "I gave her my word to that effect, and I am not inclined to break it."

"Do you know what it is to rob a poor girl of her character—to refuse all explanation ? Have you ever thought of what the consequences may be, Sir ?"

"She deceived me—that is all I can say."

"That is not sufficient. As her relative, I have a right to demand a fair statement of the case."

"Not if she wish otherwise."

"Sir !" cried Harriet, warmly ; "you are playing the part of a coward."

Sir Richard seemed to stand on tiptoe at this charge, but he turned red, and looked a trifle embarrassed.

"Miss Genny," he said, after a painful pause, "I have no more to say, but—good-morning !"

"I shall not let it end thus, Sir !" cried Harriet after him, as he descended the stairs, looking nervously at her over his shoulder.

"You are disappointed, Miss Genny," I said.

"Yes—let us return."

When we were on the race-course again she added—

"I shall have gained one point, if I can find my uncle and tell him that it is vain to seek an explanation. Tomorrow, if Sir Richard is at the Hall, I will see his sister Agatha."

Woman proposes !

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## CHAPTER XIV.

### HOW THE DAY ENDED.

It rained all that day on Tramlingford race-course. An aggravating rain, that gave promise of leaving off half-a-dozen times, and then came down the faster, as though to wash away the delusion. A bad day for most trades that day on the heath, umbrellas in the way of business, and umbrella-less people inclined to keep under canvas tents—so long as those tents remained waterproof—and stand there in defiance of all opposition, with their backs to the goods which they hid from the general public. The thimble-riggers and card-sharpers gave it up and took to drinking; peripatetic tradesfolk hawked their goods about in vain; a man with an ingenious revolving index-hand, that stopped at various colours, and encouraged the world to divers wagers, spun round the hand in vain, and anathematised the weather and the three moneyless urchins who were never tired of watching his operations; the betting men caught in the aggregate more colds than dupes, and the jockeys crept about in waterproof habiliments, till the bell rang them and their horses to the business of the day. Only the drinking-tents prospered, with the exception of one man who had speculated in umbrellas, and he had gone home early in the afternoon raving mad with delight.

I had long since grown tired of horse-racing under difficulties, and wondered when a return to Follingay farm would be judged expedient on the part of Mr

Genny. Harriet sat coiled under the chaise umbrella, with the great rug spread over her knees, shivering, and cold, and miserable. Genny, his nephew, Mr. Grey, and even myself, tried, like our contemporaries, to believe we rather liked it.

"We maun see the crack race," said Mr. Genny, his teeth coming in like a castanet accompaniment; "but it be horribly wet!"

"Or passably damp," said his nephew, who had been smoking cigar after cigar, with a rapidity that had long since distanced me.

"I wish some one would make a start, if only for example sake," said Grey aside to me; "I believe if one of these wise folk would have the moral courage to move, we should almost clear the course. Hallo, Ipps, what is it?"

"What time maun ye be going, Mr. Genny?" said he, with a touch of the hat; "'cause I'll see after the grey mare."

"Presently, Ipps. How is she—dry?"

"Well, pretty dry, Sir, considering."

As he passed I felt him touch me on the arm, and, looking after him, I saw that he turned his head and beckoned me. I followed him to the backs of the various vehicles for some distance, until he stopped suddenly.

"I'm tould I can trust you, Sir," he said, looking wistfully at me.

"Trust me with what?"

"With not making a bother about me to the ould gent."

The old gent was Mr. Genny, who was at least twenty years his junior.

"Why should I make a bother about you?" said I; "has anything happened to the mare?"

"Noa, Sir," and his shrewd little eyes twinkled in his head.

"Well—what is it?"

"A gentleman wants to see you, Sir, at the back of the grand stand."

"Whom do you mean?—Mr. Thirsk?"

"To be sure, Measter Neider. Oh! but you're quick!"

"You knew that he was coming here to-day?"

"I had a suspicion loike, Sir."

" You're too old a man to play this false game, I should have thought, Ipps."

" False be a hard word, Measter Neider."

" How long have you been with Genny ? "

" Nigh on seven-and-thirty year."

" And a traitor to him at the last ! For shame, Ipps—you dishonour him, and your own grey hairs."

" Wull, wull, I was caught in a net, and *he* woond it roond me, and tempted me with his mooney—me who wor a poor man. And he wor only in love, you see."

" You poisoned Genny's dog, Ipps ! "

" Lord, forgie me !—how did ye speer that, now ? And, for the Lord's sake, don't tell on to the measter ! I had gone too far then to go back, and it wor all agin tide, and too strong for me. I can trust you ? "

And he looked eagerly into my face.

" He is the stanchest fellow under the sun, Ipps," said a voice close to my ear, and a moment afterwards the hand of Nicholas Thirsk was extended towards me.

" You are here, then !" I said, shaking hands with him.

" Or my Fetch—guess which ! "

It might have been his Fetch, so ghost-like and colourless was he ; only the touch of his hand was feverish—and the hands of a Fetch were of ice, I had been given to understand on good authority.

" You look as if you didn't expect me, Neider," he said.

" I doubted it, certainly."

" Yet I pledged my word for the second day of the races—and I'm a man who holds fast to it."

" Well, are you well ?—and has the world of London smiled more favourably than the world of Welsdon in the Woods ? "

" Would I have given up one world, before I was sure of a better reception in the other ? " he rejoined.

" There is sometimes a slip between the cup and the lip ! "

" True, moralist," he answered. " Ipps, you can go."

" To the old place ? "

" Yes ; and keep a sharp look-out, for the life of you."

" All roight ! "

Ipps departed, and I said,

"I am sorry Ipps is your head spy and informant, Thirsk."

"A clever workman uses all sorts of tools," replied Thirsk, conceitedly.

"He is an old man, with but spare time before him for repentance."

"Why, you are always thinking of repentance!" cried Thirsk; "and what is the repentance of that old fellow to me? I have not led him into temptation—merely paid him for letting me know when the coast was clear once or twice. He's a sharp old fellow, though he did think I slept at the back of the house once, and flung half the gravel path up at William Grey's window. And then he was so horribly honest at first, and I hate poor people with too many virtues. And so—amen!"

"And now to change the subject. What do you think of the races?"

"I haven't thought about them yet. The Tramlingford cup is run for next, I believe?"

"Yes."

"The grand race, when the soddened loobies and boobies of the county will be all eyes on a half score of silk jackets—when behind the scenes here a murder might be committed, and no one the wiser."

Thirsk's face flushed, and his dark eyes glittered at me. I could see his small ungloved hand opening and shutting with his excitement.

"Thirsk—you mean something!"

"Patience, and let me shuffle the cards again, before I let you know what the turn-up is. Come and have some brandy, *mon ami*!"

"No, thank you."

"Keep the cold out and the spirits up! Murder's a-doing, Neider, and I want you to help me!"

"I shan't try to guess at your riddles—when will you please to explain?"

"I repeat, patience."

He linked his arm through mine, and led me through a maze of vans and carts, and horse-tents, until we passed into a refreshment booth, standing a little apart from the general assembly, and driving a fair trade with coachmen, beggars, gipsies, and ostlers.

As we entered, a man advanced and spoke to Thirsk, who whispered a few words in reply, and put money into his hand. Standing at the bar, Thirsk ordered two glasses of neat brandy, drank his own off at one gulp, and surveyed me with his old mocking look when I diluted mine with some water from a pewter can on the counter.

Thirsk was very much excited—as he set his glass down, it clattered with the agitation of the hand that held it.

“How long before the great race, *now?*” he said to me.

“The bell is ringing, I think.”

“So it is!”

The ostlers, coachmen, and nondescripts made a rush from the tent, even the landlord left his business in charge of a dirty servant-maid, tucked up the bottoms of his trowsers from the wet grass, and hurried across to the race-course.

“Didn’t I say murder might be done here?”

“And it is to be done,” I said, half jestingly, “or you’d never look so pale.”

“Am I a white-livered wretch when the time comes to strike a blow?” he said; “courage!—that’s not like Nicholas Thirsk!”

He took a purse from his pocket, and drew therefrom five sovereigns, which he placed in my hand.

“An old debt!” he said.

“Received with thanks,” I replied.

“Part of it I can’t repay—when I owned I was poor, and you didn’t shrink away from me—I can’t repay that good feeling. *That*,” clapping his hand on my shoulder, “made me your friend till the death.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t you know, old sceptic, that you are a good fellow, and that there are few of your stock in the world? You’ve a hard, dry way of showing your likings, but you’re honest and true, and I bow,” here he made a grave salaam, “to the virtues I have not, and yet envy. You were a mother’s boy, and I was a father’s bugbear—lo! the difference in *us* is easily accounted for.”

“And the secret?”

“Shall speak for itself—come with me.”

We left the tent, and turned still more out of the general track, to the high-road, where a closed carriage and pair were drawn, to the side of a huge elm tree, that sprung from the opposite side of the hedge, and shaded the road-way. The man who had spoken to Thirsk stood at the horses' heads.

"This looks romantic—eh, Neider?"

"Thirsk, you don't mean to run away with Agatha Free-mantle?"

"But I do!"

"You will be discovered."

"I think not," said he, coolly; "I have arranged an odd conglomerated plan of carriage, and railway and carriage again, that will baffle the very devil himself if he set off in pursuit."

"I hope you have well considered all this—it is a step for life."

"For the golden, roseate life lying beyond the present—yes."

"For the life which, shorn of its romance, may be more barren than you think, and may break more hearts than yours. Oh! Thirsk, this girl's heart must be worth the prizing to make this sacrifice for you."

"Shan't I prize it? Am I the villain of this love-story?"

"I hope not—I will believe not."

"In the new life you shall meet me, and judge for yourself. Don't preach at me now—I can't bear it."

He drew the loose cloak he wore more tightly round him, and marched up and down the high-road. His face was a troubled one, and I could fancy, watching him, that he was mistrusting his own future. Surely the life he spoke of could not be so bright and roseate to cast such shadows on him in that hour!

The man suddenly mounted to the coach-box, and arrested Thirsk's meditations.

"It's all right, governor."

Thirsk, with a "wait here, please," to me, darted back the way we had come. The race-bell rang out again—the hoarse murmur of the crowd told of the strugglers for the Tramlingford cup having started pell-mell for the winning-

post—even the man on the box stood on tiptoe and gaped after the scurrying dots of men and horses that flitted across the landscape.

“‘Gipsy Jane’ will win after all, Sir,” he called to me from his post of observation; “the wet’s done good for *her* backers.”

I murmured an inarticulate response; my whole interest was absorbed by three comers—Thirsk and two females—who were rapidly advancing.

“Nicholas, who is this?” I heard one agitated voice inquire.

“My friend—one we can trust—Mr. Neider.”

“Was it necessary?”

“I promised you to start without a debt in the world, and I owed him five pounds. And I wished him here, dearest, to give us God speed on our way.”

They were close upon me; the female on the left of Miss Freemantle kept her face studiously concealed from me. Miss Freemantle trembled very much and looked anxiously, almost piteously, towards me.

“You are the friend of him I choose before all the world, Mr. Neider. Will you be the first to blame me for this step?” she asked, in a faint voice.

“It is scarcely a wise one,” I could but answer.

“It is not a hasty one, believe me. I have weighed every chance, and every probability, and the whole world is against me and my Nicholas. I trust my future with him fearlessly.”

“I will wish every happiness for that future, Miss Freemantle.”

“Thank you.”

She entered the carriage and began to cry passionately, almost childishly; her female companion endeavouring by some earnest words to soothe her.

“Thirsk, she is but a girl still,” I said; “have you acted well or generously?”

“Could I have acted in any other manner?” he asked, almost fiercely.

“Why did you bring me here as a witness—almost as a confederate?” I said.

“A friend’s face is worth seeing at the last—and I would

not have *her* think me wholly friendless, or that all the world was to turn against her from this act. Wish her happiness again, and say a word or two to cheer her up a little. She is moved like the wind by a word."

He almost pushed me towards the carriage door, standing at which I reiterated my best wishes for her happiness. I could not think, on the spur of the moment, of any reassuring words—I saw only rashness and folly in the step that took her from her natural protector. She had lived in an atmosphere of romance which she had created for herself, and knew little of life and the harsh realities before her. Her companion shrank back once more, but I had already recognised Mercy Ricksworth.

"I am glad you are not going away unaccompanied, Miss Freemantle."

"I take a faithful friend with me," and she pressed Mercy's hand in hers; "a girl who has suffered much for my sake."

"Can I deliver any message at home, Miss Mercy?" I inquired.

"No!—no!—I shall write to-morrow. Mr. Thirsk," she cried, "are we not losing valuable time?"

"Right, Mercy—the wisest head on the youngest pair of shoulders. Let us be on the wing!"

He sprang into the carriage, whence he reached his hand towards me.

"Say God speed, if you even object to this bold stroke for a wife."

"God speed you both!"

"Amen. God speed us! And now, coachman, drive like the devil!"

The carriage whirled away, and I was standing alone in the queen's highway. A few moments, and the carriage was a blot in the distance, rendered indistinct and misty by the heavy slanting rain. A strange flitting away, at a strange time, under circumstances that told of much strategy and plotting—of an ill reward for many years of guardianship, honest and well meant, if severe.

Still, God speed the plotter who had gained his ends, and the trusting woman who had placed her future in his hands—I could but wish them that.

And yet, amidst it all, I could but doubt it !

\* \* \* \* \*

Returning thoughtfully to the race-course, I met a jostling crowd of men and children, and bedraggled women, talking, whooping and screaming, and in the middle thereof honest Peter Ricksworth in the grasp of three of the rural constabulary, who found quite sufficient work to hold him, drunk as he was.

The crowd swept past me, and I caught at the ragged fringe of it, in the shape of a bullet-headed youth of fourteen.

“What’s the matter ?”

“A row in the grand stand—he got in somehow, and tried to knock Sir Richard Freemantle head-over-heels, Sir—and jumped on his hat, Sir, and such a jolly kick up there was as ever you seed in your life, Sir ! He got into the stand with somebody else’s ticket, they say, Sir,” added this communicative youth.

Almost involuntarily, I felt for the pass I had purchased at an earlier period of the day

It was missing.

END OF THE SECOND BOOK.

## BOOK III.

### OLD PROMISES.

“In love and in debt and in drink this many and many a year.”

BROME.

“*Cleander.* But tell me, I pray, this, Pasiphilo, whome dost thou think  
Polynesta liketh better, Erastrato or me?”

GASCOIGNE.

## CHAPTER I.

## AFTER THE SHOCK.

“ ELOPEMENT IN HIGH LIFE ! ” What a glorious subject for a county paper, when parliament has adjourned, operas have closed, and the assizes haven’t commenced ! What a deal can be made of a sensation piece of news in the hands of a careful sub-editor. Wonderful perversion of dashes and initials, like a *chronique scandaleuse* of the Town and Country Magazine times—glorious halo of mystery, through which may peer the star of promise of full revelations in the next number. An elopement in high life !—an event that does not happen every day, and affords matter for discussion and pleasant jesting amongst respectable families whose members have behaved themselves properly, and, thank God, are not as other mortals—romantic and weak, and easily tempted, and rash ! It was all as well known in the county two days after the elopement, as who had won the Tramlingford Cup for that year of grace, 1856. And Sir Richard Freemantle shut himself in his library at the Hall, and was not at home to those kind friends and acquaintances who came to console him—and learn the latest news.

Mr. Genny looked across the breakfast-table at his nephew, who was favouring him with his company for a week or two, and said—

“ That be your friend ! ”

This was four days after the races, when the marriage of Nicholas Thirsk with Agatha Freemantle had been duly chronicled in the daily papers.

“ And a very shrewd friend too—don’t you think so, uncle ? ”

“ Ay, in his way,” was the dry response.

“ Besides, it was a love-match, and Sir Richard played the haughty tyrant, and sought to mar the happiness of the young couple—why, it’s a story that should soften the heart of a mill-stone.”

"I begin to see why he laid oot forty pounds in learning the farming," said Genny ; "and ye sent him here with your recommendations to deceive me, ye rascal !"

His nephew laughed.

"That's an effort I should never be fool-hardy enough to attempt. Why, I put forty pounds into your pocket."

"Ay—and added five years to my loife. Ye moight as well have sent me a deevil's imp."

"All's fair in love or in war—eh, Harriet ?"

"No—I think not."

"I appeal to Mr. Neider."

"When we know the true story, we shall be better able to judge what is fair."

"And so subject postponed, *sine die*," cried Genny the younger.

He turned the conversation with an ease and readiness that evinced no small degree of tact, and presently he was discoursing upon books, and literary men and literary matters—a topic that fascinated me, for it spoke of a world that I had despaired of entering.

Robin Genny was a man who won upon me, but whose traits of character did not display themselves too readily. He was a quick talker, and knew a little of everything, and spoke of everything in a way and manner that had its attraction, and never failed to gain listeners. A good-tempered, easy fellow enough, probably—fond of idling time away, and assuredly not a hard worker ; he spoke of pressing work on hand, and the dunning letters of publishers, and yet never set pen to paper during his first four days' stay with us, but lounged about the farm in his plaid suit, with his hands in his trousers' pockets.

"How do you like farming ?" he said to me, at a later hour.

"Pretty well."

"My cousin Harriet tells me you once had a fancy for scribbling. Lucky you dropped it—for it's hard lines, and don't pay."

I was vexed that Harriet had mentioned my old *pechancit* to him, but I believe I did not betray my vexation.

"If you are one of the tip-tops it is all very well," said he ; "but I'm not a tip-top—I'm a general-utility man."

“ May I ask what that is ? ”

“ One who works on newspapers—slaves at the proof-sheets of dunces who pay for their abortions to see the light—cuts them up afterwards in the magazines and papers wherein he may have the honour to be principal butcher—a man who translates, or cabbages, or does anything for cash in hand.”

“ Do you write novels ? ”

“ Oh ! no,” with a shudder. “ I have enough to read them—novels are not my *forte*. I think I shall try a fast one some day, if I can obtain a fair price for the article. Or a sensation one, with a good ghost or two. Do you know of a good ghost, now ? ”

I looked at him, but Robin Genny was perfectly serious, or had an enviable power of repressing his real thoughts. He munched at a straw in his mouth, and dawdled on at my side through the farm-yard.

“ Literature is purely business with you ? ”

“ Purely business,” replied he, carelessly—“ once, of course, it was romance, and a dream of a laurel wreath as big as a Covent Garden basket of greens. Now there isn’t a dozen men out of my set who have ever heard of Robin Genny—and, when I was a ‘ young un ’ I thought of making the world ring.”

I almost fancied that he sighed over the old ambitions he had had.

“ I *did* try my hand at a novel once,” I confessed.

“ What became of it ? ”

“ I burned it in the kitchen range of Follingay farm.”

“ What was it about ? ”

“ Oh ! the usual elements of a novel—love, and jealousy, and misconstruction, and all clearing away at the end of Vol. III. in a grand tableau.”

“ Ah ! you did well not to publish it, Neider,” said he ; “ it must have fallen into the hands of the twentieth-rate publishers—those who would have offered you one price and paid you another, and trusted to your natural objection to law not to press the matter.” Men who swindle authors out of a copyright with their eyes open, and get their living by the brains of men more trustworthy and honourable than themselves. Better no author at all than a tool in their hands.

But they find me a great deal of work—why should I carp at my employers?"

"Why don't you give them up?"

"Well!" with a drawl, "I'm up to their shabby tricks, and they can't do me any harm. And one man's money is as good as another's, you see; and as they don't swindle me now, why should I care how others are swindled? If my profession would turn virtuously indignant at the wrongs done to its class, I'd give an honest kick with the rest; but I can't go kicking all alone, and making myself conspicuous. Besides, I have an idea that a few sharp-shooters like these do a certain amount of good, and keep us lively and looking after our own interests. And so it's all right, I daresay."

And he chose a fresh straw, with the fresh subject that he started immediately. He was a practical man, who looked at every thing in a pounds, shillings and pence light; who had outlived romance and fancy, and took things as he found them, and was not Quixotic enough to attempt reformation. He earned money and spent money, and lived a tolerably easy life; was well known to the trade as a clever writer, and to his class as a good-tempered, jolly fellow, who would lend a crown out of his last ten shillings, and never remind an unfortunate Bohemian of the little account owing. He would not discourse on literary matters again that day, and I was anxious to hear more concerning them. How he made his first step in life, and when the barriers were surmounted, and who first took him by the hand, and praised his work and set his heart beating and his eyes swimming with tears. But he would not talk of his early days, when he was a "young un;" he feigned to have forgotten them, and to consider them days to be laughed at and satirised, as if an author ever forgot his first work, and the first word that cheered him on, and the first chop that that savage critic gave him over the fingers!

"Let us go back to the farm and have some of my old uncle's home-brewed," said he; "we've talked of the shop till I'm dusty."

"What was the first success you ever made, now?"

“Oh ! I’ll tell you to-morrow.”

Putting off till to-morrow had been Robin Genny’s habit through life, although I was not aware of it then.

Returning towards the farm he said—

“That’s a stiff piece of goods staring at us over the fence there—who’s the party ?”

I looked in the direction indicated.

“Sir Richard Freemantle ; why, he’s beckoning me !”

“I will wish you good-morning, then.”

And Robin Genny went on his way, and left me to approach the baronet.

Sir Richard Freemantle was leaning over the plantation fence that divided his grounds from Mr. Genny’s ; a very pale, stern face it was that met my own as I advanced.

“Do you mind stepping over this fence for a few moments, Mr. Neider ?”

The next instant, I was at the baronet’s side.

“I have been watching for you the last two hours,” he said, leading the way into the depths of the plantation.

“Indeed !”

“I did not care to arouse general curiosity by calling at the farm, though I should have done so had I not seen you in the course of the morning. Mr. Neider,” turning round and facing me suddenly, “have you heard from your friend yet ?”

“Mr. Thirsk ?”

“The same.”

“I received a newspaper this morning, addressed in his handwriting, and containing the advertisement of his marriage.”

“Nothing more ?”

“Nothing more, Sir.”

“I had a hope that he would write to you and say something about himself and—and wife.”

I could but regret that I had not heard from Nicholas Thirsk, and I ventured to express a hope that Sir Richard had received a letter from his sister.

“I have not,” he said, closing his thin lips together. “I am not worth a line, even soliciting that forgiveness which I shall be too ready to grant.”

“I am rejoiced to hear that, Sir !” I cried,

“Why are *you* rejoiced, Mr. Neider?” and the dreamy grey eyes assumed a sudden keenness for which I had not hitherto given them credit.

“I think such news would be gratefully received by your sister.”

“And Nicholas Thirsk?” he added.

I hesitated in my reply. Words that Thirsk had uttered in excited moments told of a deep vindictive feeling against the man who stood before me. And yet Thirsk had gained his ends, the man was baffled, and the successful schemer need bear malice no longer.

“I should think he would be pleased to forget the by-gones, and begin a new life, wherein you and *he* might judge each other more temperately and justly.”

“I am afraid you know but little of your friend.”

“I have not attempted to fathom his character, Sir Richard, but I have been a witness to many efforts of a generous nature to assert itself.”

“Efforts that have always failed, Mr. Neider.”

“I will not say always.”

“You made his acquaintance at Welsdon?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Ah! you are a friend of a few months. I have studied his character for years.”

“And were mistaken in it, Sir—he has told me that story.”

“Well, well, it is a story that belongs to the past—who was right, or who was wrong in it, we will not consider now. Surely the present is bitter enough, and lonely enough for me!”

“It may soon brighten, Sir.”

“I will try and believe it;” and he began raking the dead leaves at our feet with his stick, as he had raked amongst the ruins of Welsdon Castle in my first conversation with him.

After a silence of considerable duration, he said, looking up suddenly—

“Don’t you think that I bear my disappointment like a philosopher?”

“I have not had much opportunity of judging, Sir Richard,” I replied.

“I bear no malice—I take the news of *her* want of confidence, and of my loss, as I would take the news of her death. I am very sorry, but I am striving hard for resignation.”

“It may be a happy match, after all.”

“I should like to be her friend still,” he said; “perhaps when you write to Mr. Thirsk you will say that you met me accidentally, and that I implied as much?”

“I will, Sir.”

“Thank you—it will be a favour conferred.”

“He raked over the leaves at his feet again and traced sundry strange characters in the damp mould beneath them.

“Would you take me now for a very hard man?” he asked suddenly

I could scarcely forbear a smile.

“Speak frankly—you have seen me before, and must have already formed an impression.”

“My first impression was that you were a stern man, Sir Richard—living much in the past, and studying it too much.”

“And forgetting the present and my duties in it?” he added.

“Partly.”

“And your second impression, if you had one?”

“That it was only your manner—a bad habit of repressing emotion and evincing no sympathy, the better to sustain the character you have adopted, or have deemed most fitting.”

“I don’t say you are right—I can’t expect you to read me very correctly, Mr. Neider,” said he; “but, good Heavens!—you are nearer the truth than my half-sister, my ward, has been all her life! She could see only the calm exterior, and never the heart playing beneath. I was not the twaddling, or the loving brother of the foolish novels she read—so I was the man of stone, who loved nothing, and whom nothing could love. I tried to be the foil to her own impulsiveness, and over-acted my part, and helped to bring about this evil. But I acted for the best, and my heart acquits me. You might imply this, too, indirectly?” he said, with an upward glance at me again.

"At the present opportunity it will be a pleasant task, Sir Richard."

"I should act it over again," said he, candidly ; "a few features softened here and there—the result of this experience—but still the past offered me back, I should betray the whole trust of her father and mine, to act in any different fashion. You need not mention this, though."

"Certainly not."

"I do not believe that she will write to me—it is not likely—and as I am the aggrieved person, I cannot make the first advances," said he, with his old haughtiness ; "but if your friend correspond with you, it is in your hands, Sir, to promote much happiness. If they have resolved to spurn my friendship, why, I have lived within myself some twenty years, and can afford to bide the time when they will seek me out. I am not a demonstrative man, and a little contents me. How is Miss Genny ? "

"She is very well, thank you."

"You may tell her that I am perfectly willing to offer her a full explanation now," said he, with the ghost of a smile playing over his thin lips.

"I think Miss Genny is able to guess all now, Sir."

"It is very probable. It is the first edition of the same story, and Mercy Ricksworth was too excitable, and betrayed the plans of her for whom she professes so much affection. I thought I had been on my guard for life after that deliberate attempt to deceive me—but, there—there—there—it is all passed and gone, and there's the future to look forward to—eh, Mr. Neider ? "

"Wherein everybody must understand each other better, Sir Richard. It appears to me to have been hitherto a life of mistakes."

"Have *you* never been greatly mistaken ? "

"I fear so."

"It is a peculiar sensation—good-morning, Mr. Neider."

"Good-morning, Sir Richard."

I had proceeded a few steps in the direction of the farm-land, when he came after me.

"If you should hear from Mr. Thirsk, you might—ahem!—think of me. I am a very hard man in reality,

Mr. Neider—cold, and inflexible, and unsympathising, but I—I should like to hear if she is well."

"I will inform you of any news which Mr. Thirsk may feel inclined to communicate, Sir Richard."

"Thank you."

He extended his hand towards me—a thin, cold hand, that lay in mine like a dead fish for a moment, and then was withdrawn. We re-echoed our good-mornings and parted—he to his home, which a disappointment had scathed ; I to the farm, where a great trial awaited me.

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## CHAPTER II.

### A FRIEND THE LESS.

I HAD no occasion to communicate with Sir Richard Freemantle. Nicholas Thirsk did not favour me with any particulars concerning the progress of his marriage felicity. Probably he had started on his honeymoon, and might not be in England. Having attained his object, and succeeded in the one great scheme of his life, he could afford to forget his friends—even the scenes and characters of the past estate he had abjured.

"He was always a slap-dash fellow," said Robin Genny to me one day, when Thirsk was the subject of our conversation ; "you need not be surprised that he has not written—he always hated trouble of all kinds. Pity he has no concentrativeness," added he, as if all the concentrativeness in the world had fallen to his own particular share.

"His better chances in life will make a better man of him."

"I'm not quite so certain that more money will improve him. I have known him with his pockets full of money ; and a rare fellow he was to stand treat, and a rare fund of humour had he in the merry days before he tried the

Mephistopheles vein ! He wrote an article once for a magazine of ours, and, by George ! it was the best thing in its way the public had had for a long while. When he was offered terms for a series of articles, he wrote back that it was like anyone's hanged impertinence—he didn't call it hanged exactly—to take him for a writing fellow. That's Nicholas Thirsk sober—did you ever see him drunk ? ”

“ No.”

“ A man possessed with seven devils might be a match for him. Very strange you have never seen him drunk ; I suppose there wasn't much chance at Follingay farm ? ”

“ He had turned over a new leaf, and fallen into better company.”

“ Humph—is that personal ? ”

“ Oh, no—I don't suppose that you were Nicholas Thirsk's tempter.”

“ He was a tempter of me, though, the young scamp ! Many an honest pound have I lost in that gentleman's society. And many a day's work spoiled by a splitting headache after the enjoyment thereof. Oh ! they were rare days, though !—and all work and no play will make dull boys of the best of us ! I wonder what would become of me, too, if I hadn't this safety-valve of country quarters. By George ! it's a grand change for a man ! ”

“ You work hard sometimes.”

“ I believe you—forty-eight hours at a stretch, occasionally. You should see the pile of work I have promised to knock through by Christmas ! ”

“ Shall you finish it by Christmas ? ”

“ Yes—thereabouts. I ought to be working here, but there are so many things to distract one's attention. Farming life, farm-pupils, fresh air, a general kind of laziness over the establishment at this time of year—and Harriet.”

I winced at the last inducement to forego work, and he winced too at my change of colour, and twitched at his long brown moustache. His cousin's name had escaped him, and he proceeded to enlarge upon it for my edification.

“ Not that she hasn't been my incentive to work many a time—real, downright hard work, that brought in almost money enough to pay my debts. If she only knew what a pile of work there was in my portmanteau ! ”

She guessed it, however, for the following day she asked him whether he intended to idle all his time away ; and spoke so much about the folly of wasting it, that that very afternoon he sat down to the little table before the farmhouse window, and began writing at a railroad pace. Grey and I sat and watched the rapid progress of his pen over the paper, and wondered what he could be writing about, for his thoughts to flow so easily. Constant practice had rendered his pen a ready one, and it was with perhaps a pang of envious feeling that I regarded his performance, and contrasted it with the lot I had chosen for myself.

And yet my envious feeling was really not for his advantages, his tact in writing, or that quasi genius which kept his head above water—I chose to think so, but I had more than a mere suspicion that I was jealous of him, and of Harriet's power over him.

For I could see that Harriet exerted a strange influence—that he respected her sound common sense—and that every day seemed to add to his interest in her, and to the earnest looks with which he regarded her. Remembering William Grey's words to me one day concerning him, I still had not fairly set him down as a lover of Harriet Genny's. He was her cousin, and naturally friendly in his manner to her, but he betrayed no excitement or embarrassment, or timidity in her presence, till the first week of his stay there was drawing to a close. Then his character seemed to change, or some old character that I had not known to be resumed, and Harriet grew strangely petulant and capricious in her ways.

I sought information from William Grey ; he was the one least likely to suspect any change in me, and I drew him out concerning Robin Genny's former visits, and his general style of address to Harriet.

“About the same as usual,” said Grey. “He has only been here twice before during my stay—was a regular creep-mouse fellow for the first few days—all round shoulders and trousers pockets—a *blasé* being, that nothing seemed possible to brighten. Then he took a turn, or received a talking from Harriet, on the sly, for he went to work like a steam-engine, and took to Harriet the more for scolding him, and fell quite into a loving track, if you understand what that means.”

“And she?”

“Oh, good-tempered and bad-tempered, by fits and starts, just as she always is,” said Grey, surveying me intently.

“Just as she always is—she is not always so! If it were not for some hidden care, anxiety, secret, what you will, that is weighing her down, Grey, she would be a very different girl.”

“She’s a good girl—a warm-hearted, feeling girl, I own that, Neider. Don’t fire up so!”

“I haven’t fired up.”

“But you have—and ah! old fellow, your turn has come to put your head in the trap!” he cried; “will you confess, now?”

“I have nothing to confess, Grey.”

He looked disappointed.

“Perhaps you are right,” he said, after a few moments’ silence; “it is not everyone who is fool enough to prate of the girl he is inclined to fall in love with, and of the hopes and sorrows born from his passion. You’re a chap who can keep his secret to himself. I’m of a different nature, and inclined to bawl it forth into the ears of the first friend I take to. I can’t expect to be your confidant, Neider.”

“If there were anything really serious to tell, Grey,” I said, hesitating; “if there were a story worth telling!”

“Some other time when there is,” said he. “Have I told you that I am going away next week?”

“Certainly not.”

“Finally settled, Alf—the world before me, and old Welsdon to be nothing more than a painful reminiscence.”

“All painful?”

“Well, I won’t say that. I think,” with a wistful look towards me, “that I found a true friend here—and that’s something, as times go. Do you remember our talk about a farm on the joint-stock principle, with your mother for housekeeper—eh?”

“To be sure.”

“If you marry and settle, there’s an end of it—if the Fates go against you, some of these days I’ll step into your lonely farm, amongst the Cumberland mountains, sit down before your fireside and make you an honest man’s offer.

I'll cheer you up, Neider, and turn you out a bright and presentable being. Don't forget this."

"You're the most unselfish of men."

"There may be more self in it than you bargain for—by the way, you did not tell me, Neider, you saw *her* on the race day."

"It was hardly fair to declare it—it was Thirsk's secret, not mine. How did you ascertain it?"

"From old Ricksworth."

"He's in prison."

"Oh, no, he's not. He was fined five pounds for the assault, and I paid it."

"Rather foolish, wasn't it?"

"Rather, perhaps," said Grey; "but she *is* fond of the old scamp. He was very grateful for the trouble I had taken, and prison would only have made him a worse father to *her*."

"He has been in prison before?"

"So he has—and you can see how it has damaged his morals."

Perceiving me laugh at this, he broke forth into his own good-tempered laugh in return, and we went down stairs to the farm-parlour, in better spirits than we had left it.

The week passed in watching Robin Genny—studying him—trying to discover further traits of his character. But he was hard at work that week; all the morning and afternoon he wrote in the deserted farm-parlour, at his favourite place under the window—and steadily, rapidly, the sheets of MS. seemed to grow under his hand. On our return from the fields, he would put away his work, and take a share in the general conversation, or in the games at cards which his uncle was inclined to introduce now the nights were lengthening, or in the spirits which were placed on the table every evening whilst Robin Genny remained a guest.

The last night of William Grey's stay there was quite a little feast for the occasion, and decanters of wine added to the spirits, and a cake made, and the farm servants called in to drink William Grey's health, and wish him a fair life's journey. He had been a tractable pupil, partial to farming, and a favourite of Genny's—and Genny did his best to show that he would be missed at Welsdon.

“Persevering and industrious, and regular in your habits, and no fool—ye’ll make the best of farmers, Mr. Grey,” said Genny.

“Thank you for your opinion.”

“And here’s my best wishes, and long loife to ye, Sir!” cried Genny, drinking his health for the third time; “ye’re a credit to my teaching.”

“That’s all right, then,” said Grey, laughing.

“And we’ll make a braw noight of it for once,” said Genny; “and Harriet shall gie us some songs on the piano—and Robin and she shall try some of their old duets together—eh, Robin?”

“I’ll do my best. Harriet, do you remember any of our old songs?”

“It is two years since I attempted them, Robin.”

“We’ll try them for the good of the company, and go back two years, then.”

“Impossible!” cried Harriet, and there was a meaning in her voice that brought the blood to Robin Genny’s face. I saw it there, and my heart thrilled again.

It was an evening intended to be festive; but the majority of us were sad; the piano was out of tune, Robin Genny forgot every one of his duets, and cracked horribly in all the upper notes, and even lost a little of his good temper over his repeated failures; he made up with copious libations of gin and water, however, till Harriet said a few words in a low tone, and checked his habit of grasping too often at the decanter.

“Doan’t stay your cousin,” cried Genny, who was in high spirits, genuine home-spun farmer’s spirits, and had seen the last bit of by-play; “we’ll send my gentleman to bed to-night as jolly as a trooper. It bean’t the first toime Robin Genny has not known the stairs from the banisters.”

“Robin thinks of rising early, uncle, and finishing his work.”

“So do I,” cried Robin.

“And so you will,” said Harriet.

“To be sure. See what influence this stern little Spartan has over a man.”

“Will you be silent?” urged Harriet, with a frown.

Robin Genny spoke not a word more.

That night Grey left us. He and I rode over in Mr. Genny's chaise to the railroad station. He wished to catch the last train—the same train as that by which Nicholas Thirsk had left a little while ago. What a different parting, and what a different friend to shake hands with and say "Good-bye!"

Grey was a sensitive, simple-hearted fellow, and could scarcely keep the tears back. His voice was a strange compound of the natural and the unnatural, the falsetto and the bass profondo. His hand was the grip of a vice.

"Good-bye, my dear Neider; don't forget me."

"Trust me."

"And—and if you are not in love with Harriet Genny now, but are likely to be, I would look sharp. Delays are dangerous, you know."

"Grey, I love her!" I said, in a hoarse whisper.

"I'm sorry."

"Confession for confession, you see. And now, what are you sorry for?"

"I don't know. I don't wish to dash your hopes down," said he; "but try and learn the best or worst at once, before Robin Genny goes away. And take care! Good-bye."

He had just time to leap into the train, and leave me comparing his warning with that last one of Nicholas Thirsk, which had showed Thirsk was the shrewder man, and took more heed of things passing around him.

The same warning, and of no avail to me!



## CHAPTER III.

### THE GREAT PLUNGE.

I THOUGHT of Robin Genny all the way home. Midst the natural sorrow at parting with one I could believe a stanch friend, Robin Genny would intrude, take the foremost place, and gradually set aside all other thoughts. Was he my

rival, or was he merely Harriet Genny's cousin, dreaming not of a nearer and dearer tie of relationship?

Yet she had told me not to think of her ; had, with a touch of terror in her voice, prayed that no word or look of hers had set me dreaming of that which was impossible ; had spoken indirectly of some mysterious barrier—perhaps her own antipathy!—that must irrevocably part us. That she spoke hurriedly, without a moment's thought, was not assuring, and that her demeanour towards me had been changed from that day, was rather a bad sign than a good one.

I drove home, brooding on all this, with the warnings of my late co-pupils faintly sounding in my ears ; I entered the farm-yard, more of a lover than I had ever been.

Ipps awaited me.

“A foine night, Measter Neider.”

“Yes.”

“So we've lost another on 'em.”

“Yes.”

“Mayhap I maun be all the better for it, now,” he muttered—“for eighty odd years an honest man, Sir.”

“Take the horse round to the stable.”

“You'll keep it all from the Measter—I think you guv me your word on the coarse.”

“Yes.”

“I should loike the Measter allus to think me a fair servant, though I be going, you must know.”

“Going?”

“Yes—I guved warning to-night. I can't stop and face him, and I wor offered another place loike. And he wor too good a Measter to turn agin. I shan't die a happy mon.”

“In whose service are you about to enter?”

“I haven't mentioned it to the Measter—you mayhap guess.”

“Mr. Thirsk's?”

“Roight, Sir.”

“You're an old man to think of a change in life.”

“I'm unsettled loike!” he cried, excitedly,—"I've become a sneak, and a prisoner, and a thief. And I was such a light-hearted chap!”

“A thief too?”

“Wull, you *dropped* your pass to the grand stand, and I gave it to Peter Ricksworth. He made a row just at the time we wanted it, though he worn’t in our confidence, of course. All bluster and no brains—it would’nt ha’ done to trust him.”

There was a strange mixture of conceit in his superior craft, and shame at the part he had played, amidst the old man’s discourse ; but he was a traitor to the homestead, and I had lost all interest in him.

“Where is the Master?”

“He’s gone to bed, and left the young couple cooing——”

“Left them *what*?”

“Love-making, I am incloined to think.”

And Ipps looked sly.

I left him to take the horse and chaise to the stables, turned the handle of the outer door, entered the passage, and locked and bolted the door on the inside, with a noisy demonstrativeness, which I intended as a warning of my approach.

But they were talking earnestly, almost passionately, and had forgotten me. As I neared the door of “the best room,” I could but hear the subject of discourse, and pause without, and even listen, like a traitor.

For a few moments to stand there listening, with my temples throbbing, and my heart making fitful plunges, and my demented thoughts striving to excuse the part I played there. Was it not concerning me, and was it not my happiness that was affected by their strange discourse? To know that she loved Robin Genny was to save her from much painful persecution on my own part ; and if I could but learn it in those unworthy moments spent there!

“This is the insane folly of two years ago,” I heard her say ; “the passion without root—the spur of the moment, which would deceive me, and has ever deceived yourself.”

“Have you lost all confidence in me, Harriet?”

“Have you deserved that I should retain any?” was the cold reply ; “year after year this same profession of attachment followed by the same forgetfulness.”

“Never forgetfulness.”

“Let us be simply common friends from this night—I see no good, no love, no honour to follow that which you propose. Oh ! Robin, I ask you to give back——”

“Harriet, I will give back nothing ! You have ever mis-judged me ; you are mistaken in me now. You will make no allowance for my struggles in the world around me. Let us end this folly of an age, and share all together—we have wasted many years.”

“No, no, no !”

“Harriet, have you forgotten the past ?”

“The dream of a foolish girl.”

“The promise made to one who loved us both, and died believing in us. Think.”

“My God ! bear me witness how it is a thought that has been ever before me !”

“Then have faith in me. I, who have done nothing to forget it, demand it standing here.”

“You demand it with a brain dizzy with drink !” she cried, indignantly.

“Harriet !” he cried.

“Don’t come near me—I believe it. Speak of the promise to-morrow, and ask the fulfilment of my share in it, and I will keep my word.”

“I will ask it.”

Harriet was speaking again, but I stole noiselessly away. I had heard enough to crush out every hope of mine, and I was dying for fresh air—for the cool night air upon my fevered temples—for the quiet stars to look down upon my trouble—for the silent commune with my own heart, which I distrusted still.

I unfastened the door again, crossed the farm-yard, and went out on the country road, to think of this, and act all this, and strive to see beyond, and what would come of it. I did not know how fast a hold she had upon my heart till then, for until then I had not wholly despaired.

The farm-house dog, Nero, who had been let loose by Ipps for the night, offered himself as companion ; he had acknowledged me as one of the family some time since, and occasionally favoured me with his company. But his noisy barking disturbed me, and I sent him back to his place of

watch, and went on alone, at a rapid pace, as far as the Castle ruins, where I turned back and retraced my steps. I scarcely know if I thought at all—certainly nothing that was rational or could be brought to any sober test. As bewildered and excited I returned to the farm-house, found the door still unfastened—though the clock on the stairs was striking eleven—and walked into the silent room, that I had quitted at an earlier hour with William Grey, and where Harriet and Robin Genny had talked so earnestly and strangely.

A silent but not deserted room, for she was crouched on the floor before the hollow fire; her arms flung over the chair beside her, and her head buried in her arms.

As I advanced into the room, a low moan escaped her.

“Miss Genny,” I said, “what is the matter?”

She was on her feet facing me the instant afterwards.

“Nothing, Sir.”

“You are unhappy—you have been sorely tried this evening, Miss Genny.”

“How do you know that?” she asked, suspiciously.

“Pardon me, but I have heard—intentionally heard, for my heart was sorely tried, and I was tempted to my own unhappiness—part of a serious conversation between you and your cousin.”

“You are frank, yet false,” she answered.

“I am sorry that you think so. My heart was tried, I repeat; if there be no excuse in that, I have none other to offer.”

“Tell me what you have heard?” she cried impatiently.

“You were speaking of a promise in which he had faith, and you had not—you were speaking of a past from which he seemed to urge a claim upon you and your love.”

“You have heard all, then?”

The room went whirling round with me, and I lost all self-command, all remembrance of her warning words made on that evening when my heart betrayed me. I saw her passing across the threshold of a life where she would be ever distant and away from me; I felt that she was troubled, and I knew I loved her. It was my one faint

chance before the morrow when he was asked to speak again and end all, and I struck for it blindly, rashly, and forgot all else.

“Miss Genny—Harriet—I have heard that which has filled me with a horror which only you can dissipate—only one word of yours to give me hope for all my future life! Don’t leave me with that look of indignation,—the offering of a life’s devotion is, at least, worthy of an answer.”

She paused and turned towards me with a varying countenance—the pride, the fear, softening to a strange pity at my earnestness.

“Mr. Neider, this is romantic folly, and I am too old and worldly for your generous passion. This is—pray let me go.”

And she wrung her hands before me as I intercepted her flight towards the door.

“An answer, Miss Genny—I think I have a right to it.”

“What can you possibly expect from me?”

“An assertion that I am in every way unworthy of you, or that there is a chance—however faint and weak—of making you my wife.”

“There is no chance,” she murmured.

“You do not love Robin Genny—you dare not own that?”

“I dare!” and she looked defiantly into my face.

“Miss Genny, I am answered.”

“I have been his promised wife five years—and a few weeks will end all engagements in a happy marriage.”

Her voice never rung more mournfully than when she spoke of this blissful end to all engagements.

“Love, honour, duty, and more than that, compel me to his side—it is my rightful place, and I will take it and fear nothing.”

“Does he love you?”

“He says so—he thinks so. Years ago, when I was touched with that fever of romance from which you suffer now, I thought that he loved me too well, and neglected for me too many of his worldly interests. He says he has not changed, and seeks me still, a portionless bride.

Why should I doubt him—what right have I to doubt him?"

"Miss Genny, there is a mystery beyond all this, which you do not care to fathom—something between you and that happiness of which you speak so coldly," I urged; "I see it plainly written on your face."

"You are mistaken," she replied; "more, you are blinded by your folly, and see all things darkly. Surely you are answered, and will not seek to pain me by idly shifting thus your ground of argument—surely you will let me pass you now?"

The tears were in her eyes, her lip was quivering, her whole demeanour was as that of one struggling to resist an avowal, and be gone from me, ere it leaped to the light and betrayed her. And I could not resist her wish—for I loved her, and she beseeched me with such earnestness.

I stood aside.

"Forgive me, Miss Genny—God bless you, and lead your steps aright! Never more a word to pain you from my lips."

She passed me, and I thought that she had gone, when I felt her light hand touch my shoulder.

"Mr. Neider—you, you don't think that—that I expected such a declaration as your own—or that in any way, from curiosity, a woman's vanity, even a woman's love, I sought its utterance?"

"No," I answered.

"It was a painful story, that I might have told you months ago, and checked all this; it was on my lips once, and fear, or a natural embarrassment, hindered the avowal. It was a story that seemed burnt into my brain one day, and then lost to me and thrown aside the next."

"Why do you tell me this now?" I cried.

Her eyes met mine, and her face was scarlet for an instant—for one instant, and then she might have risen from her grave, so ghastly white was she.

"They say that no woman ever received a confession of love without having encouraged it!—and oh! you will not think that. It will be my bitterest reminiscence if you harbour such a thought as this!"

"My own folly and wilful blindness, Miss Genny," I replied; "I am justly punished for my vain ambition."

"You will learn to smile at all this some day," she said ; "you are young, and I am two years on the wrong side of you, and old enough in thought to be your mother. You will find in the world one so much more fitted to be your wife ; so much younger, brighter, fairer than the betrothed of Robin Genny."

It was the consolation that the world always gives—I had adopted a similar method of solace in William Grey's case—I had heard it, read it fifty times. It might verge on the truth as a rule, but in that hour there was no comfort to be gained from all the wise men of that world wherein I was promised so much.

She stole away silently, almost reluctantly—as though a footfall might startle the consolation she had never left with me—and I sank into the chair she had abandoned, and pressed my burning temples with my hands, and looked at the ashes in the grate, as though they had been the path of life that stretched before me from that cruel day.

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## CHAPTER IV.

### THE LOVERS.

ROBIN GENNY was at work early on the following day. Descending into the farm-parlour at an early hour, I was surprised to find him so soon at his post by the window.

He looked up as I entered, and said "Good-morning."

"Good-morning, Mr. Genny—I am not interrupting you, I hope ? "

"Good company never stands in the way of my work," he replied. "I write at all times, and in all places, save in a study, which is my abomination—being always a dull place. I'm not in your way here, Mr. Neider ? "

"Oh ! no," I answercd ; "I am going over the land."

"I wish I could go with you," he said, with a glance at his M.S.; "I have a horrible headache, that the fresh air might cure."

"Are you very busy?"

"Well, I am. Time and magazine-day wait for no man, so I'll keep my headache in all its intentness. Have you seen my cousin Harriet this morning?"

I had not seen his cousin Harriet, and as he recommenced writing immediately after my reply, I passed into the farm-yard. Crossing the window at which he sat, I saw that the pen had fallen from his hand, and he was staring very dreamily across the room—thinking of the cousin for whom he was waiting there, I felt assured.

And that cousin—would she tell Robin Genny of my last night's proposal, of all that extravagance of action into which my heart had betrayed me—or would it ever remain a secret between her and me, that we should carry to our graves? Something unreal, and romantic, and foolish, which could not intrude into the garish outer world and live. Something that had flashed across her path and startled her, and vanished—lighting up for a moment a new mystery, of which she had never dreamed till then.

I did little service to Mr. Genny that morning. Whether the men were in the fields fulfilling their allotted tasks, or there were five horses or fifty in the meadows, or the new plough acted well, or had even arrived, I was as ignorant as though I had kept to the room wherein I had fought for sleep and failed.

Never was my occupation more of a name and a sham; never felt I more how hard, prosaic, and unprofitable was the calling I had adopted. In the first shock of a great disappointment, all callings must feel alike, all ambitions beyond the one that has died at our feet feel scarcely worth the thought of a moment. I did not consider so in that hour; I delivered my hearty curse on farming life in general, and then drifted away to thoughts of her who had turned me from my track.

Thoughts of the re-engagement between her and Robin Genny, and why it had lasted so long, and with such little happiness to her. Of her strange fretful moods, which were, I knew, foreign to her natural character, and seemed an

evidence of inward torture and uncertainty—a shrinking away from the future, which lay dark and impenetrable before her. Of my gradual study of those varied moods, and the errors into which those studies led me—the vain belief that a noble spirit fretted against the monotony and unsympathy of her present life, and pined for an existence wherein might be more of affection, and kindred feeling and interest. Of the stern truths which followed all this, and dismayed me, and beat me from the path whereon was sunlight for myself; versed me in the bitter knowledge that it was Robin Genny's love she had pined for, and which, doubting, had rendered her unsettled, and her true character unguessed at. And yet they hovered near me, confusing everything, those other thoughts which had rendered me a dreamer, and set me in an evanescent world—thoughts of her brighter moods, her fairer words and looks, her approximation to a happiness that had awakened mine, and in which Robin Genny had no life, and seemed forgotten.

And so the old thoughts and the new, and the end of all no nearer certainty.

I was in the farm-house parlour again; the maid-servants were arranging the breakfast-table—Robin Genny still wrote as if for his life; his uncle stood with his back to the fire, watching his nephew's work with no little wonderment. Harriet Genny was not visible.

"It be the oddest way of arning money I ever knew in my loife," said the farmer to me as I entered. "I doan't think I could arn a brass farthing at it myself. Where be the people that buys such scrawl now?"

"Oh! over there," muttered his nephew, absently.

"Maun hard work it must be," said he, "to be always sitting about and thinking of something worth printing—or not worth printing," he added, drily; "and going at it noight and morning, morning and noight, and never dreaming of fresh air."

"We don't work quite so hard as that, uncle."

"Ye doan't, I'll wager!" said his uncle, with a twinkling of his keen eyes towards me.

"I get through plenty of work too," cried his aggrieved nephew, from the corner.

"Ay, but ye do it in jumps somehow—a week's skulk, and then a week's solitary confinement, and always unsettled. Bean't that it?"

"No."

"Wull, ye know best."

Harriet entered shortly after this brief dialogue, a shade more pale, possibly a shade more firm and grave. I observed that Robin Genny turned to her with a nervous, vacillating glance as she entered, and that her first looks were for the student at the window.

"You are busy, Robin?"

"Yes. I have resolved to finish this by twelve o'clock. It has been long promised, and I'm working at it like a steam-engine. Adieu to the easy life of the past, and welcome to the life in earnest lying before me."

"Hollo, young man!" cried his uncle, "didn't ye sleep well last noight?"

"I don't know. I don't think I did."

"Ye're talking like a play-actor, and play-actors always talk nonsense."

"On the stage; they're solid, matter-of-fact fellows off."

"Ay. Perhaps they be."

A miserable morning following that breakfast. I remember that all its brightness changed, that the rain fell heavily, and hindered out-door work, and left little for me to do save to feign reading by the fireside, and to watch Robin Genny over the leaves of my book. He was my rival, and I could not keep my eyes from him. He had known Harriet Genny years before me, and had fallen naturally in love and served five years for her; and now his reward was coming—a blessing ever to thank God for!

Had the thought of the nearness of his happiness made a different man of him? It was a different face on which the grey light of the clouded sky fell; it was like his promised life, tinged with the earnestness that was new to him. There was intelligence thereon, and a certain faith in the future. I could fancy that he had made himself a host of promises since yesterday, and had sworn to keep them, for the sake of her who would commit her happiness to his charge; that he had awakened to the realities of life, and the necessity there was to regard life's duties in a different

manner. He had been an idler on the banks, perhaps, and now he leaped into the stream and struck out manfully.

Still, most men have these sudden thoughts of reformation, and many sink back to their past estate, tiring of those persistent efforts which alone can lead to the sphere beyond their own. Was Robin Genny one to fight the battle manfully, or would he flinch in the heat of the conflict, and let braver men push by him? I was not sufficiently acquainted with his character to guess, but I had gathered sufficient news of him to fear.

Watching him more intently, I was reminded of Mr. Genny's rough estimate of his labours that morning, and could fancy that that morning's work might be an epitome of his life's. He certainly wrote by fits and starts, as though one train of thoughts was foreign to a second, and there was a jostling between them that stopped the pen, and turned him from his occupation. But that he worked at all evinced no common power of concentration; surely he had much to trouble and distract him, standing on the verge of the new life, concerning which he had spoken so confidently that day; and he worked hard, though fitfully; and if his pen stopped, and he looked beyond at all that lay before him, there was a bright figure to gaze at, that might well lure him from his task. Now and then he glanced towards the old-fashioned time-piece on the mantelshelf, and set to his task afresh, working more vigorously as the time sped on. The last hour his gaze never wandered, nor did his pen swerve from the paper, and as twelve struck he cried—

“*Un fait accompli*,” Neider! Pooh, I never worked so hard in my life. I said that it should be done, though; and who says I never keep my word?”

I felt that Harriet had said it once, and he had resented it, and been anxious to disprove the charge against him. Had said it yesternight, before I stole into the passage, and learned from eavesdropping the folly of the hopes I had fostered!

When she re-entered the room he cried—

“I have finished it, Harriet. What now?”

“What now?” she repeated—almost gasped.

“What new charge against my habits, my weakness of mind, the instability that loses all the prizes? Come!”

“I make no charge.”

“From the night to the morning is but a change of purpose in me. Words spoken by one ‘dizzy with drink’ are forgotten in the sober daylight. I remind you of my wishes last night—of your own promises concerning them.”

He held his hand towards her—both his hands, which shook a little with his energy—and she slowly advanced and placed hers within them. My jealous eyes were watching them, and they thought of me as some statue in the room that had no feeling, sympathy, or comprehension. And she—how pale she was! how steadily she looked at him! how strangely “Robin” sounded from her lips!

Genny, still holding her hands, turned to me with a beaming countenance.

“Neider, will you wish two old sweethearts joy? We are going to be married in three weeks.”

“With all my heart!—with all my heart!”

I started up, and let the book fall to the ground. I saw her colour change at my vain effort at composure, as I reeled rather than walked from the room.

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## CHAPTER V

### A SKETCH OF THE PAST.

“MR. NEIDER, the rain has cleared off; shall we have a stroll towards the town? I must look up the stationery department.”

“I have no objection.”

It was the afternoon of the same day, and Robin Genny was the first speaker. A few hours since the lovers had acknowledged their future intentions, and I had left them to themselves.

When the author and I were on the road he said,

“Mr. Neider, I am going to compliment you on your taste.”

“Indeed!”

"Harriet has told me that you asked her once to be your wife."

"Right."

I answered hoarsely, and with a spasmodic contraction of my fingers, but he did not notice my embarrassment. He even laughed; having won the battle he could afford to laugh, according to the general rule.

"She's a girl who keeps nothing back," he cried, with more enthusiasm than I had seen him exhibit hitherto; "frank and open as the day. Perhaps a little too frank, sometimes," he added more gravely, as an unpleasant reminiscence appeared to suggest itself.

"You are not indignant at my entering the lists against you, Mr. Genny?"

"My dear Neider"—he had become quite familiar lately "how did you know I was in the lists, when I was a little in doubt myself?"

"Ha!" and I turned upon him for an explanation, as though I had a right to ask it.

"Possibly not in doubt," he corrected, "but still plodding on in the old mill-horse style, and forgetting in my work half my thoughts of the one waiting for me in this dull old spot. And yet hardly forgetting," he corrected a second time; "a sort of—sort of—"

"Indifference," I added, seeing that he was at a loss for a word.

"Confound it, no!" he cried. "Sins enough at my door, without the shame of indifference. More like over-certainty, when one is sure of a thing, and so lets it not trouble him and interfere with his duties. I don't know that there is a word for it, and if there is, I can't fix it. Does it matter?"

"Not much."

"I can put my ideas better in shape on a sheet of paper, Neider; take my paper away, and I'm floored. But hang it! what made you think of such a thundering bad word as indifference?"

"I really don't know."

"You're not jealous, now, of my success with Harriet?" said he. "It was a success before your time, and so there was not a fair chance for you. And as I'm not a jealous man I admire your taste, and am glad to see that

there are others in the world capable of distinguishing the real merits of my quiet cousin. "Neider," suddenly clapping me on the back, with a heartiness that sent me a few feet in advance of him on the road, "she will make a man of me!"

"Don't you lay claim to the appellative yet?"

"A bachelor's only half a man; and a literary bachelor is an addle-headed being, who is preyed upon by harpies, and becomes a child in their hands. Harriet will fight my tradesmen's battles, pay my tradesmen's bills, keep me to the sticking point when that cursed 'reaction' carries me the devil knows where."

"Are you subject to reaction?"

"I used to be," he said evasively. "It's a general complaint. You know what all work makes of the fabulous Jack?"

"Yes."

"Dull, the moralist says—I say, desperate. And now comes the time for Robin Genny to regard things practically, and make his cousin an author's wife. Upon my soul, I should have been a better man if she had been my wife two years ago."

"I wish she had!"

He laughed again.

"Two years ago I was down here no better or worse off, and there was a long talk between us—almost a quarrel—and she thought that I should never make a good husband, or save money, or become domesticated; and she or I, or both parties, mutually consenting, put off the evil or the happy day for a couple more years; and somehow, after all, I haven't saved twenty pounds. Odd, isn't it?"

"It seems a little odd."

He was a babbler, and forced his confidence upon me. His heart was full, his brain was excited, and he wished to talk of Harriet to me; he had some dreamy, good-natured idea that it was a kind of consolation that he was offering me for my disappointment. A generous rival, whose every word pained me, however, for it betrayed his weakness, and seemed to throw a shadow on *her* future.

"I never could save, you see," he continued. "A man in my position has no one to offer him valuable advice. I

ought to have been married long ago—she would have had me at any time—she only wished to see me a little more steady and business-like. And I was a fool, who went on anyhow ! ”

“ A sad confession, Genny. But all the folly dies out on the wedding-day.”

“ Oh, of course,” he said easily. “ If a man don’t buckle to with a will when there’s another to provide for, he’s a man fit for nothing in this world.”

“ Yes ; and the sooner out of it the better.”

“ I shall turn a saving man, like Uncle Genny,” he continued ; “ cut all the loose fish of my acquaintance, and cultivate the friendship of the steady ones. You’re a steady one.”

I laughed, and thanked him for the compliment. He was so communicative that I ventured to ask him what had brought about the first engagement with his cousin Harriet. The whole story was before me in an instant.

“ She was an orphan at an early age, and was brought up with me under my mother’s roof. I think my mother must have loved her more than myself, for I was always being lectured on my thoughtlessness, and my impulsiveness, and all the other ‘nesses’ that mothers will worry their offspring about. She and Harriet were true mother and child, and Harriet was grateful for my mother’s affection, and took my part—God bless her!—when the old lady was too hard upon me, and had a style of her own that did far more good than my mother’s. So the poor old lady began to think that Harriet was just fit for me, and the only one to make my life a blessing, and died believing we should be man and wife some day. It was her happiest thought upon her dying bed ; for we pledged our troth, as fine writers say, before her, and vowed to be ever true and faithful, and to take each other for husband and wife when the fitting time arrived. That’s the story, Neider ; what do you think of it ? ”

I did not give my opinion, and in a moment he had forgotten that he had asked for it. I was thinking of promises made at death-beds, and all that she had said concerning them, one early day at Follingay farm. She had called them cruel exactions when speaking of mine.

Did the shadow of her own press heavily upon her? Had she outlived her girlish liking for this man at her side, and never known what love was, and let gratitude for a second mother delude her, till the waking came?

He spoke again, and turned my thoughts a little.

“ My mother was a shrewd woman, who knew what was best for me,” said he; “ she pictured this day, and all the comforts it would bring me, and all the better life in store for me, guided by Harriet, solaced by her sympathy, sustained by her rare confidence. Well, I believe it now.”

“ Did you ever doubt it ? ” I cried, hastily.

“ No,” he said, taken aback by my impetuosity; “ but the time sped on after she had gone to Uncle Genny’s home, and *somewhere* ” (it was a favourite word of his that *somewhere*) “ she grew more fidgety and cross—just a touch of Uncle Genny’s peculiar style—and I couldn’t see, like a fool, that it was my fault or my ways that were unsettling her, until our long talk this morning. Why, she would have even *given me up* to-day, if I had had the least doubt of my happiness with her; as if that was likely, Neider ! ”

“ It seems impossible.”

“ And so I’ll become the best of husbands—a model creature, that other wives shall envy—and every promise that I make her I’ll keep, or curse me for a knave next time you meet me ! ”

He meant it then at least; his cheeks were flushed, he seemed to grow more tall as he walked on beside me; his very look was noble. I could not fancy him, just then, the weak-minded, easily-led man he had confessed himself to be.

I could look at him and doubt again when we were in the village, and he had drawn me very quickly and unceremoniously into the “ Haycock Inn.”

“ A bottle of the best port wine in your cellar ! ” he cried to the landlady’s daughter. “ No, stop a moment, while we are about it, you must drink the health of the happy couple in the true wine of Champagne—it’s a favourite drink when I’ve cash to spare. A bottle of Veuve Cliquot’s, Miss, if there’s such a thing in your cellar.”

The landlady’s daughter looked perplexed at the demand; she did not know if there was any champagne in stock; there was not much inquiry for it at Welsdon in the Woods,

but she'd ask her mother. The mother found us a bottle of champagne—which was “not even full brand,” said Genny, disparagingly—and my companion made the counter ring with the sovereign he flung upon it.

“Will you walk into the best r——” began the landlady.

“Oh, hang your best rooms!” cried Genny, unwiring and getting rid of the cork with a celerity that told of considerable practice. “Where's your glass, Neider? Look out! Now!”

“Here's health and happiness to the future Mr. and Mrs. Genny!”

“‘Amen, sings the clerk,’ ” he said. “And here's Alfred Neider well out of his love troubles, and a fair life before him, with lots of money to spend. And here's utter confusion to all shams—for this is gooseberry vinegar, by God!”

He frowned over the bar at the licensed victuallers for an instant, and then laughed heartily at their amazement, and dropped the change from the sovereign into his pocket without counting it. I could believe that he had been a friend of Nicholas Thirsk's—there was all my absent friend's dash exemplified before me.

“And good luck to the poor!” said a voice; and Peter Ricksworth, who had slouched out of his favourite study, the tap-room, stood behind us with his greedy black eyes fixed on the champagne bottle.

“What, Uncle Peter!” said Genny; “just in time to drink my very good health, too. Another glass, landlady, for a gentleman of distinction.”

“She won't believe it!” said Ricksworth, with a grin.

The glass was placed on the counter, and Robin filled, and handed it to his disreputable relative.

“What am I to drink now?” said he, swaying from his heels to his toes in a manner extremely suggestive of too much drink already.

“Good luck!—isn't that comprehensive enough?”

“Good luck, my hearties!” and he tossed the wine off, and made a wry face afterwards.

“Ugh!—that's what you call gentlemen's drink, I suppose?”

“They say so at the ‘Haycock,’ ” was Robin Genny's satirical comment.

“It’s rum slush—what’s its name?”

“Champagne.”

“And I have been drinking champagne like beer, and never knowed it! Champagne, now! Upon my soul, Robin, I should just like to try it again, now you say it is champagne. Ho ! ho ! ho !” with a roar that made every glass behind the bar ring, “Peter Ricksworth drinking champagne at the ‘Haycock !’ ”

“Hold your glass, reprobate,” said his nephew; “and now, how’s my good aunt and Mercy?”

“Your good aunt goes it hot and strong in the usual style, young feller. She was over-sarcy last night, so I floored her.”

“That’s bad news!” cried Genny.

“She went on so, Robin,” explained Mr. Ricksworth; “she was so unmerciful with her jaw, Robin, and it was all aginst the goodest, best of girls—because she went away sudden-like, with the mistress she thinks so much of. As if Mercy don’t know what is best—as if it wor right to go at her hammer-and-tongs, like a damned steam-ingin—as if I’d stand it!” he bawled, with his face becoming darker and more full of rage at the reminiscence.

“Steady!” said Genny, quietly.

“I shall make a bolt of it, now,” said he, in a tone less removed from the danger of bursting something in his head; “I shall give her up, and go to Lunnon!—I won’t support an old she-devil like her, and get no thanks for it, and be etarnally preached at! Why don’t she swear and bully like a reasonable Christian?—that’s what I want to know! What does she come the parson over me for?”

“I shall see you in London, then?” said Robin.

“I’ll bet five pounds you will.”

“Good-day, then.”

“You’re in a hurry, man,” turning on his nephew with his habitual scowl; “I mind the time when you wouldn’t ha’ been so ready to shake an uncle off. When you wanted to meet that Thirsty fellow hereabouts, and keep old Genny in the dark.”

“I had the pleasure of spending an evening at Welsdon’s End then—right you are, Uncle Peter,” said he; “and the Thirsty fellow managed well, didn’t he?”

He had succeeded in his idea of turning the conversation to a less unpleasant topic, for Peter Ricksworth laughed again vociferously.

"He managed to get a rich wife!" cried Ricksworth, "and play the old sodger with that gallows ugly corpse of a man, whose life I'd care no more for taking than a rabbit's. I owes him a grudge, mind—I owes him a grudge!"

And in his excitement he crushed the wine-glass almost to powder in his hand.

"That's a shilling's-worth of damage," said he; "Mrs. Harrison, I think my nephew won't mind settling that."

Whether Robin Genny had an objection or not, did not appear; he paid the damage, and, anxious to curtail the conversation, led the way from the inn. But Peter Ricksworth was a man with a grievance, and one seldom escapes the recital of a man's wrongs under similar circumstances.

"He turned my gal away—he had turned me away before that; he's an icy devil, with no mercy in him; and if I had got at him on the stand—Ipps gave me your ticket—I'd have left him as black as a coal. Oh! he's a grand, bouncing barownight, that thinks hisself a God-a-mighty of this parish, and makes poor fellows like me go all wrong."

Peter looked the picture of injured innocence after this, and began to whimper and discourse volubly, if hoarsely, on all the afflictions that had beset him since his boyhood. He continued with us till within sight of the farm-house, when he shook hands affectionately, gave us his blessing, and strolled a few paces back with his hands in his pockets. We were not quite rid of him, for an instant afterwards he was at our side again.

"What was that jaw about at the bar, Robin Genny?"

"What is that to you, Peter?"

"About a future Mrs. Genny—Harriet, for a sixpence!"

"Well, you're right. We publish the banns next Sunday, so I need not make a secret of it."

"I'll wish you joy, if you don't get it."

"But I shall get it."

"Are you quite sure?"

"What do you mean by 'quite sure?'" cried Robin, indignantly.

" You always were a bit of a fly-away cove, you know," explained Peter ; " going first this way, and then that, and led by the last man's palaver—take a warning from your poor old uncle, Robin. You won't find such a stunning warning anywhere out of a penny tract—what the devil the parson will find to preach about when I'm in Lunnon, the Lord knows ! "

And reflecting on the future subjects of the Vicar of Welsdon's sermons, Peter-the-black-sheep left us finally for good.

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## CHAPTER VI.

### THE MARRIAGE.

*" I publish the banns of marriage between Robin Genny, bachelor, of Westminster, Middlesex, and Harriet Genny, spinster, of this parish."* Strangely it sounded in the old church of Welsdon, and set my heart beating a little faster, though I held my prayer-book with a firmer grip, lest the trembling of my hands should betray that any fire were lingering yet within me. I was to live all down, and forget it, and seek other ambitions—it had become a world of promises, and that I had promised her !

The announcement of Harriet Genny's coming marriage took the country folk by surprise, and country folk express their emotions more visibly in rural districts than in towns and cities. There was quite a rustling in the free seats ; people stood up unceremoniously and turned their open-mouthed, vacuous-looking countenances towards our pew—even Sir Richard Freemantle's pale face veered for a moment in our direction—old ladies began whispering together—and one boy of fifteen, attached to the farm, became so excited about the feet as to kick the hats of that hypocrite Ipps out of the free seats, and half-way down the middle aisle.

I bore it better the second week ; I had begun to live down my little romance by that time ; to talk it over soberly with myself, and plainly see the folly of it, and where nursing so vain a delusion might lead me in the end. I was neither a coward nor a madman at that time ; I bore my trouble—and it was a greater one than I care to avow here—without alarming my friends by my misanthropic looks or morbid airs. I tried to sink my passion within myself, and work my way on in the world, as though it had never lived ; I believed that I succeeded. What I suffered in the effort need not be paraded in this story—it would be idle vapouring, and from the purpose I have set myself.

A few days before the wedding, Harriet Genny very calmly and quietly mooted the subject of her engagement. She had altered for the better, since the little storm of three weeks ago ; the mind once resolved to a great step in life, shakes off the petty excitabilities that disturb the even tenor of its way.

She had become a different woman ; as grave, perhaps, but free from all those little irritable fits, the exhibition of which had puzzled me, perhaps attracted me towards her, in the hope of fathoming a mystery

“What has Robin Genny told you ?” she asked, with a little of her past abruptness ; “I see that he has made a friend of you.”

“He has told me of the long engagement that existed between you,” said I in reply.

“How it began in the old times, when he and I were almost boy and girl ?”

“Yes.”

“All of the past, and nothing of the future, then ?”

“He spoke of the future—I had forgotten that !”

“May I ask what he said ?”

“He believed the better time was in store for him, solaced by your sympathy, and sustained by your rare confidence—I quote his very words.”

“He said that !” she cried, with flushing cheeks.

“More, Miss Genny—he meant that.”

“Surely it is not a hard fate to share the battle of life with one so hopeful, to say a kind word in his hour of need, and by sharing his troubles with him make them lighter,

and keep his heart from sinking. Would you believe that I am a woman of great patience?"

"I can believe you are a woman with a great loving heart," I answered.

"If we should ever meet again, Mr. Neider, you will find me in a new character—the true character, which I have hidden here, or natural circumstances have thrown a veil across. It is a grand task that lies before me," she added thoughtfully; "and I will do my duty in it, and make his life a something that has never been, or he has never guessed at. God will reward——"

She stopped and turned hastily away. That was a promise she could not assert or build on; standing on the threshold of the life beyond, she could not bring God's blessing on the efforts to become the best of wives, or make him who claimed her hand the truest, noblest of husbands. I could fancy, looking at her then, that amidst her sanguine view of coming happiness there fell athwart it a doubt of all her efforts and his strength. To see her face change thus, and note the look of pain that rested there, was to pray silently with her for the better times beyond her strange, unfathomable future.

Strange and unfathomable, for I was doubting too; amidst my belief that she had long loved Robin Genny, there would come a suspicion that the marriage was not one of hearts—that the old promise was as a vow that her conscience could not set aside, although her will and common sense rebelled against it. To think of all the past was to strengthen that conviction; but the past I was not dwelling upon then. I had the clue, but it was not my place, and I had not the heart to follow it.

They were married, and went away to spend the honeymoon. A quiet wedding enough, on a wet day, with little speech-making, and Mr. Genny in bad spirits. No guests invited; no friends of either Robin or Harriet present—it was difficult to say who were their friends, or where they were at that time—Mr. Genny to give the bride away, and I to support the author in the character of groomsman; a little wine to be drunk in the farm-parlour, and beer *ad libitum* to every man, woman, and child on the Follingay estate.

‘ We shall be always glad to see you at our little town crib,’ said Robin Genny, shaking me heartily by the hand ; “ for auld lang syne’s sake don’t forget us, Mr. Neider.”

“ Doubtless we shall meet some day. Meanwhile, my best wishes for the lasting happiness of you both ! ”

“ Thank you, old fellow—thank you.”

I shook hands with Harriet Genny—Harriet Genny still ! —and looked very firm, and grave, and pale—the reflex of the calm, handsome face that met my own, and was going away for ever. Never again, never again to brighten the old farm, and make the place like home to me and that troubled old man, who did not know how much he loved her until the final parting came !

They were gone at last, and we drew our chairs closer to the fire, and looked rather dismally at each other—farmer and pupil.

“ Ay, but it looks odd already,” said he, with a sigh.

“ Somewhat dull. It’s the contrast.”

“ I suppose we shall get used to it,” he continued ; “ just as she, poor lass, will grow used to him, and the ways which she has feared so long.”

“ Feared—what do you mean ? ”

“ Ay—what’s the matter, lad ? ”

“ What do you mean by feared ? ”

“ Well, it’s been a fast-and-loose kind of engagement for soom years, and Harriet was always in doubt how much he thought or cared for her in Loondon. He seldom wrote—and his was a gay loife, mixing amongst gay men, and letting them make him more worse and oidle than he naturally be. Ay, but he’s a rum ‘un ; and if he doan’t make her happy now,—darm me ! but this will be a black day for the lot of us ! ”

“ But—but she loves him ? ”

“ Ay,” said he, “ so she says. I doan’t think she knows hardly—for she has been fighting not to think too much aboot it, I’m incloined to think. Oh ! but she can be wilful and daring when the fit’s on her, loike the rest of an odd lot. Still, I hope she loves him—if she doan’t, she’ll soon larn. Stir the fire, young chap—how cold it is ! ”

“ It is a frost this afternoon.”

“ Ay !—ay !—and these early frosts nip at the hearts of

things ! I hope," with a twitch to his ear, " all my little queer tempers did not make her toired of the farm at last, and anxious for a splash like. I woan't think that, God bless her ! You're sparing the wine, now ? "

" Oh ! no. Shall I fill your glass ? "

" Ay ! it passes away the toime. I'm a-thinking," said he, after a long pause, " that ye'd ha' made a decentish sort of a husband for my Harriet. Odd to have these thoughts come creeping up one's back, but it's been my idea—though I wouldn't ha' told ye before this, moind—some four or foive months or so. Ye'll be a good farmer."

" You stand alone in your verdict."

" Ay ! but I'm roight ! Ye mayn't loike it much, but ye're pig-headed, you see, and will grub along decentish—and ye're quiet, and doan't turn away because a thing's hard, or not to your mind. Ye're loike Harriet in some things—and though she's older, you'd ha' suited each other tolerably well. No matter, it wasn't to be, so here's luck to the t'others. I've drunk it once or twice before to-night, but we can't have too much of a good thing. Ay ! but it's very odd without her," he added again.

Matthew Genny, farmer, never became used to the change in my time. Peter Ricksworth took leave of his wife and Welsdon End, and Genny tried the experiment of making Mercy's mother his housekeeper, under proviso that, in the event of Peter's sudden reappearance, Mrs. Ricksworth should abandon her post.

But Mrs. Ricksworth was not to my taste ; and her austere and demonstrative piety—not to mention her icy parlour manners, and her nagging dairy ones—did not add much to the halo of saintship she expected everyone to see round her mob cap. A well-meaning woman, who made the worst of everything, and never indulged in a smile ; who would have thrown me into a melancholy mad state, had not I been anxious for out-door walks during her stay.

I left Follingay farm before my year had expired. I had learned much from Mr. Genny, who was the best of farmers, and to whose practical knowledge I was indebted for all my after-success in that sphere which had been thrust upon me, and to which I was slowly, surely settling down.

" I ha' advertised for a pupil or two," he said to me at

parting ; "it's getting a little bit too narrow here to breathe freely. And I ha' got used to coompany, ye see. Well, young man, good-bye to ye, ye'll prosper if ye work fairly—and work fairly ye will, for it's in ye ! And there's my best wishes into the bargain ; and if ye wroite to an old man a loine or two of news, it won't make him feel less lonely, or without friends. God bless ye, my lad, and foind a wife as fast as ye can, and remember me to your mother. Something tells me we aren't saying good-bye for ever."

"To be sure not ! You must come and see my Cumber-land farm."

"Coomberland land is maun gritty—ye'll do better in another county."

"Wherever I settle down, I hope to see the face of a friend."

"Thank'ee lad. And ye'll see me then, if ye mean it."

He did not think how I should see him, or what a change awaited him. Dame Fortune, that had brought him many prizes, and made him tolerably rich, might bring an avalanche upon the farm with the next turn of her wheel. Here the prizes, there the blanks, and life a lottery ; men and women playing high and cautiously, and the background full of silent, shadowy watchers, perhaps.

In a world of changes, could he, or I, or those whose lives have been faintly reflected in these pages, expect the stream of life ever to flow on eternally peaceful and unrippled ? Are there not streams dried up by burning suns, and streams that overflow their banks and spread desolation right and left ? Far away as dream-land, and beyond it, lie the glassy rivers untroubled by the storm, and steeped for ever in undying sunshine !

## BOOK IV.

AFTER!

“A ring of a rush would tie as much love together as a gammon  
gold.”

GREENE.

“From trouble when I fastest flie,  
Then find I most adversitie.”

SIR DAVID LINDSAY

## CHAPTER I.

## A JOINT-STOCK SPECULATION.

It was home again in the little quiet Cumberland farm. The old home before the days at Welsdon ; where I was heart-free and full of fancies, and looked at life so differently ! The dear old farm, that had been my German father's hobby, and wherein he had lost one or two thousand pounds in strange experiments on land, and had only begun to experience the blessing of profits a few months previous to his death. The farm, well managed, would always be a little independence for my mother and me, he had thought, and he prayed me not to abandon it for the sake of that mother, whose protection and comfort I was to be when he was gone. I promised him upon his death-bed, and this was the result—neither unlooked for nor unprofitable. During my absence from Cumberland, the land had been placed under the direction of a farm-bailiff, whose management had been lax, and whose interest was only lukewarm ; it had been a fair season for farmers in general, or the loss at the mountain farm might have been serious. As it was, we were a hundred pounds poorer that year—and the loss was fortunate for me. It braced my energies, dissipated all gloomy thoughts, sank the past recollections and the vain ambitions, and turned me with a full, but willing heart, to the pursuits that I had chosen. I worked hard, and, thanks to Mr. Genny's past tuition, was able to see progress before my own harvest had been gathered in. A fair harvest all over the country that year, and less of the insufferable mountain rains that rendered farming in the Cumberland valleys always a dangerous speculation.

It was a contrast to my old life in the same spot ; a little while since, and I was wandering about the moun-

tain passes, and idling by the tarns, dreaming of the fame that was not to descend upon me, and the name in the midst of men that was never to be mine. Now all the poet's fancies, and the manuscripts that had borne no fruit, were gone, and I regretted them not. I worked at the restoration of my mother's mountain home ; for the fair, full-hearted mother who had been ever kind and gentle. It was a practical world now, and imagination in its midst was out of place. Moreover, my pupilage at Welsdon had not been all lost time, and, thanks to the teaching of a man more shrewd in his particular knowledge than I had ever met, the farm gave promise of being a successful enterprise. I was happy in my own quiet, reserved way, that cared to make no sign. The time sped on with me ; life seemed settling down ; all the old past friends might have vanished for ever for the signs they gave of their existence, and the bygone time might be the fragment of a novel ending in uncertainty. Fourteen months, or thereabouts, since I had quitted the farm at Follingay ; the harvest in, the wheat sold at a fair price per quarter ; the farm-stock thriving, the evenings "drawing in," my mother and I companions by the fire we took to so early in the Vale of St. John. A quiet, homespun life in the valley ; primitive times over again, with nothing to disturb the even tenor of my way ; life monotonous, yet not unpleasant. With more friends round me, I might have reached to something higher than the quiet, reserved happiness to which I have alluded. And after all, was happiness such as mine more or less than resignation ?

My mother and I were by the fireside : my mother knitting complacently, and listening to the book that I was reading—the cat purring between us, and blessing in her heart the chilly evenings that had brought the fires round so early. And in the midst of this home picture came a friend from the times I was living down, and took his place between me and my mother, and laid his honest hand upon my shoulder, with a suddenness that made me start.

"William Grey ! "

"I bribed the servants to spare me an announcement," said Grey, laughing at my amazement ; "and here I am, like the ghost of my old self—coming to prove that I am in

the habit of keeping my word. Mrs. Neider," turning to my mother, "I hope the name of William Grey of Welsdon is not quite foreign to you?"

"My dear son has often spoken of his fellow-pupils," replied my mother, rising and making her best curtsey, and offering him both her plump, mitten-ed hands; "friends of my Alfred are the best friends of his mother."

"I need not doubt that, looking into the mother's face, and knowing what true mothers have been."

The tones of his voice struck me, and I regarded him more closely. I had not observed till then that he was in mourning.

"You have had a loss?"

"Yes—a few months ago I lost my mother," said Grey. "Two months after her death my father married again—a neighbour's daughter, who, they say, is to present me in good time with a little half sister. That will make eighteen of us."

He laughed at the probable increase to his family; but it was not the same pleasant laugh with which he had favoured us a moment or two since.

"She's a very good sort," he added; "though she don't agree with my eldest sisters quite so well as my father expected. However, they jog along pretty well, and as my sisters are marrying, and my brothers setting up for themselves, she is becoming happier every day. My mother had money in her own right, and bequeathed it amongst us—my share has bought me a farm, Edmonton way. A nice farm enough, and within an easy distance of town, but horribly dull for a single young fellow like me."

He sat between us, and lifted the cat on his knees as an *amende honorable* for disturbing her; and puss took a fancy to him on the instant, and was evidently a judge of human nature.

"So, the harvest being in; Neider, I relieve the monotony of my position by a tour in the lake district; winding up with an ascent of Mount Skiddaw, and a descent into Keswick and the Vale of St. John, wherein peacefully nestles the farm of an old friend. And being here, and fond of company, I intend to stay till I grow troublesome."

"Stay till I tell you to go, Grey."

“Perhaps I will,” said he, drily—“and now to business.”

“I formed a pretty fair guess concerning the nature of the business that had brought him hither, although he turned to my mother, and excluded me from a share in the conversation.

“Mrs. Neider, I am a solitary young man, with a large farm on my hands. My brothers hate farming, and will have nothing to do with me; my sisters are city young ladies, and have husbands to look after in town, and consider farming life low. The farm properly managed is likely to be good property, but it’s rather a large one, and more than one young fellow’s work. I require a partner to assist me with a little of his capital and more of his common sense; and if that partner’s in the happy possession of a mother who can undertake the domesticities, I am so much nearer peace and quietness. Now, your little boy”—with a comical glance over his shoulder at me—“would suit me very well, and I should suit your little boy, because I should let him have his own way, and he’s rather fond of it. That’s how the matter stands—so shake hands, Mrs. Neider, and say it’s all settled.”

My mother sat with her eyes very much distended, and her breath entirely gone. William Grey’s volubility was a little too much for her.

“M-m-my dear Alfred,” she gasped forth at last—“what does Mr. Grey mean?”

“Alfred, belay there!” cried Grey, waving his hand behind him; “your turn for talk will come in good time. At present Mrs. Neider is on her legs—beg pardon,” said he, reddening, “but it’s a parliamentary term, and implies that we wait your opinion on the case.”

“But I don’t understand you, Mr. Grey,” said my mother; “if you will only allow my Alfred to speak—he’s very clear-sighted.”

“All a mother’s prejudice, and I don’t believe a word of it,” said Grey; “your experience of life, your seniority, entitle you to the first opinion. I have a farm too large for me, and require a partner. This farm can’t be very profitable, must be horribly sloppy—and the sooner it is sold the better, take an honest man’s word for it.”

"But yours is a large farm, Sir, and near London, where land is expensive, and——"

"Mother," I interrupted, "Mr. Grey has not fully considered this matter—he would be the victim of his own generous impulse. There is too much to consider to decide hastily on so important a question."

"I don't see it," said Grey—"strike while the iron is hot" is my motto."

"And 'more haste is worse speed' is mine."

"Oh! you have always something in that hard head to interfere with something in my—soft one—eh?"

"Soft heart, Grey."

"Get out with you!"

The subject was deferred for that night; but Grey was ready for the charge the following morning—spoke of his old idea, that it would happen thus some day, and denied indignantly that there was any impulse in the matter. It required considerable sifting to ascertain that his farm was a valuable one, and that an equal share in it was far beyond our humble means. Still he pressed me so hard to my own advantage—not alone a pecuniary one, but the advantage of a true friend's society—that the final resolution was to sell the farm in Cumberland, and buy with its proceeds a share, proportionate to the available capital, in William Grey's farm near Edmonton.

Before the Christmas came round, we had left the grand Cumberland scenery far behind us, and were domiciled for good in our new farm. And here life began again, and the old figures of the past came from the background into the light of every day.

## CHAPTER II.

## AN EVENING PARTY.

I HAD fairly settled down to my change in life when a letter, that had been addressed to my farm in Cumberland, followed me to my new address. Opening it I discovered a letter from Nicholas Thirsk :—

“ Bedford Square,  
“ Feb. 16th, 1858.

“ MY DEAR NEIDER,—Can an old friend induce you to travel a couple of hundred miles to celebrate so important an event as the coming of age of Mrs. Nicholas Thirsk, on the 23rd instant? Important to her, me, and the heir of the house of Thirsk, whose vociferous remonstrance against a change of linen wells to my ears in the study, wherein I am locked, thinking how I can best greet a faithful comrade, and induce him to shake hands with me. I am afraid a formal invitation might have deterred you—an indignant remonstrance at your forgetfulness have given rise to a counter-charge—so I write to the Cumberland farm, and say simply, ‘*Come!*’ There isn’t a friend in the world whom I should be so glad to see.

“ I hope you will believe that I remain,

“ Ever faithfully yours,

“ NICHOLAS THIRSK.

“ A. Neider, Esq.”

It was a hastily written letter, but it was one that afforded me no small satisfaction. It spoke of his friendship, and assured me that in the midst of his new bright world I had not been forgotten. There was less sign of the reckless dash of the past in his few hurried words ; he wrote in good spirits ; but the mocking air, the crude sceptical comments on everything around him, were entirely absent. He even signed himself “ever faithfully” without a sneer at all believers in men’s affections and gratitude.

He wrote simply as one who remembered me with many kindly feelings ; and reading the epistle, I could believe that his runaway match had not proved an unhappy one. He had married a wife who brought him riches with her one-and-twentieth year, and he had always spoken of wealth as a *summum bonum*, and scoffed at those who thought otherwise. True, it appeared at first sight that it was a love-match also ; and love and money together must constitute as much perfect happiness as ordinary mortals can expect.

“ What do you think of this ? ” I said, passing the letter to Grey.

“ It reads well,” said Grey, with some hardness in his tones. He had been always a little jealous of my interest in Thirsk. And yet a more unselfish, good-tempered fellow never existed.

“ I fancy he must have altered for the better.”

“ Very probably—what do you mean to do ? ”

“ Answer the letter.”

“ And accept the invitation to a grand party in Bedford Square ? ”

“ Well—why not ? ”

“ Oh ! I can’t say why not,” said Grey ; “ unless aristocratic *réunions* should give you your old distaste for farming. Thirsk belongs to a sphere widely different from ours, and *must* naturally look down upon us.”

“ I shall not seek to intrude upon his sphere, Grey,” I answered, “ and I am very sensible of the difference between a farmer and a gentleman. Still, he presses me this once —and it is an especial case.”

“ And as your heart is set upon it, go by all means,” said Grey, “ but, my dear old fellow, don’t come back with your head in the air because you’ve been asked to an evening party at a house in Bedford Square.”

“ Has it ever struck you that I was likely to be affected by a little more outward show than we indulge in at this farm, Grey ? ”

“ Of course it hasn’t, and I’m a jealous beast, who want my head punched. I know what is the true reason, though ! ”

“ What ? ”

"It's because he hasn't asked me, and I can't swell about in a dress-coat—like one of the cock-sparrow tribe. I doubt if there are any white kid gloves made to fit my hands, which have begun to spread beautifully!"

I was laughing at his remark, when he said very suddenly and quickly—

"You'll make every inquiry about old friends. I should be glad to hear that they are all happy, you know?"

I hardly understood him for the moment, when he said, more quickly still—

"Mercy Ricksworth, I mean. That old flame of mine," he added, with an abrupt, unnatural laugh.

"My dear fellow, you don't—"

"Don't think of her now, you mean," he said, with a heightened colour; "well, I don't more than I can help, because it's not good for me. But I told you long ago that I was one who never changed—and to hear that she was happy and contented would be good news to me—that's all."

"I hope to bring you good news, then."

Grey changed the topic at once, and we were presently speaking of sowing and seeding, and other topics foreign to that little romantic past which Nicholas Thirsk's letter had helped to revive.

I answered this letter, accepting the writer's invitation for the twenty-third instant, adding a few less formal sentences which might help to prove that my memory of the past days was not unfaithful, and winding up with intelligence that I had left Cumberland and was a partner with William Grey in a suburban farm. I had had an idea that he would have written a second invitation to Grey upon the receipt of this intelligence, but I was doomed to disappointment, and started on my journey to London alone.

A long journey in a hired fly from Edmonton to the West-end of town—ensconced in a corner of the vehicle in all the glory of full dress. My admiring mother affirmed that I had never looked so nice, and Grey recommended me to search for a second heiress, as heiresses appeared to conduce to a happy frame of mind.

I do not know that I felt particularly nervous at the

prospect that lay before me—that I thought there was anything to seriously disturb me at my first entrance into the dazzling arena of fashionable life. I had been brought up quietly, seen little company, knew not much of London; but, still, I did not experience any nervous trepidation at the thought of meeting Nicholas Thirsk in a society concerning which I knew nothing. I had confidence in my own knowledge of the common civilities and formalities to be used on such occasions, and I was not naturally of a bashful disposition. I felt I should be out of my element, but that I should attract any particular degree of attention to that fact, I did not anticipate. I could dance, I could talk to a certain extent; I had a bass voice, or three notes towards one—I had attended a few parties in Germany, where my father, in his love for the “Vaterland,” had insisted upon my completing my education—and Nicholas Thirsk, gentleman, should not have cause to be ashamed of that friend whom he had honoured by his invitation.

I arrived in London at a somewhat late hour. The proprietor of the livery stables at Edmonton had not favoured me with a very agile steed, and the clocks were striking ten when I shook off the cramp in my legs, and leaped from the carriage to the pavement, over which an awning had been erected from the kerbstone to the front door. Visitors were arriving every instant, and that part of the square was lively with the voices of the unwashed, who crowded to catch glimpses of the guests, and were kept in rank by two members of the metropolitan police-force.

I was making for the steps, when a voice amidst one half of the crowd on my left exclaimed very rapidly, “Mr. Neider!” and, turning at the moment, I fancied that there was a face amongst the mob of faces that was singularly familiar to me. Still, I was puzzled, and went up the steps and into the hall, before it struck me that it was Sir Richard Freemantle whom I had recognised; then I hesitated whether to return and speak with him or not.

I resolved upon not returning. Sir Richard appeared merely to have mentioned my name aloud in his surprise at seeing me. When I had looked in his direction, his features had assumed their characteristic immobility, and he had

not uttered a second word to denote a desire to detain me. It appeared strange that the only brother of her whose majority so many were about to celebrate, was outside there amongst an inquisitive mob. It spoke of the old feud still existent ; of the baronet's pride, or Nicholas Thirsk's resentment, still keeping apart brother and sister. Remembering the conversation between me and Sir Richard, in the early times before the shock of the elopement had been received—of the wish that he had expressed to forgive all, and take his place by the side of one he loved—was to present before me a dark picture of the fierce enmity which Thirsk could nourish against his seeming foes, even when his plans had baffled them, and left them desolate.

“Mr. Alfred Neider !”

Some one had taken my hat ; a second had asked my name and bawled it up the staircase ; a third had opened a door and shouted it into a large, brilliantly-lighted room, whence music sounded, and where guests were dancing.

An instant afterwards, and Nicholas Thirsk, in evening dress, was before me.

“My dear Neider, how glad I am to see you !”

He shook my hand in his, his dark eyes danced again with pleasure at meeting me—there was no doubt that I was a welcome guest here.

“Why, how you've altered, Neider !”

“Seventeen months make a difference. I see a great change in my co-pupil.”

“Say for the better, man.”

“For the better—if it had been for the worse, I should have kept my opinion to myself.”

“So should I, perhaps,” he added ; “well, why don't you flatter me ? Don't I look as if the new life agreed with me, and as if this were the sphere I was born to flutter my wings in ?”

“It seems to agree with you.”

“Just as short as ever, Alf Neider—as if I could stand your German uncouthness, now I am a great man !”

“You will not mind it for one evening, Thirsk ?”

“Do you mean that you vanish away like a ghost down a trap after this festal night ?”

“ We belong to two worlds—a wanderer from mine would be an intruder on yours.”

“ I’ll argue that point with you another time. I wandered from a sphere similar to this to a lower, and I was unhappy, discontented, ‘ anything by turns.’ But I could have started from a low estate to this with singular complacency. Neider, old boy, I think I have a berth under government to offer you. I was talking to a big, bouncing secretary yesterday.”

“ Thank you—but I am fixed to farming for life.”

“ Truly bucolic ! Did you ever read Gesner ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ Ah ! he has infected you with pastoral notions,” said he, his old satiric spirit peering out for the first time ; “ he stands in the way of the advancement I offer you. Is it he, or a more modern, less high-minded being, yclept William Grey ? ”

“ William Grey, I am inclined to fancy,” I said ; “ but surely you haven’t asked me here to satirise me and my friends ? ”

“ Right, Neider—and shame to the host who would attempt it, and a good kicking at the same time, if you can get to his side of the mahogany. This way ; Mrs. Thirsk is anxious to see you.”

“ You flatter me.”

“ On my honour, no.”

He passed his arm through mine, and led me down the room. The music had ceased by this time, the dance was over, and the guests were promenading, gossiping, talking scandal and making love.

A brilliant crowd, through which we threaded our way—if not particularly aristocratic, and boasting in its midst few titles, still a fair sample of the upper English society. And Thirsk moved therein with easy grace ; he was right, I thought ; it was his natural sphere, and in returning to it he had left behind much of that false misanthropy which had been the attribute of the past wherein I had known him, and misjudged him.

There was a little knot of people near the raised orchestra at the end of the room—a few gentlemen and ladies, amongst whom I had no difficulty in recognising the Agatha Freemantle of old times.

She was looking pale, I fancied, and the white dress she wore appeared to be ill-chosen for a complexion never very roseate.

She looked a girl still ; her slight figure and her childish face scarcely warranted one in believing that this was the heroine of the night. Looking so young and delicate a wife and mother, she awakened more interest in herself than admiration at her charms. She had never been a pretty girl, notwithstanding that her features were more regular than one-half of the ladies there who laid a claim to beauty. It was not a want of animation either, or a deficiency of grace, which suggested that she was far from a pretty woman ; and yet I could not have said what conveyed the impression to me—what had even suggested it before then in the hasty glimpses I had had of her.

Still, that night she awakened no common interest ; the world had heard of her marriage for love, and the out-of-way means by which it had been effected. The world, always adding more shadows to a story than there is any occasion for, had made a romance of this one ; Sir Richard Freemantle was the grim guardian and the evil genius—an anchorite and an ascetic, with a heart as hard as the stones he had made a study of—a man who had sought to quench all light and life from his half-sister's path, and set an interdict on love-making. And Agatha Freemantle had been endowed with all the virtues—she had a great many—and the world, which had not had a runaway match to gloat over for many a month, applauded the unwise step, and thought how happily it all had ended. Virtue and true love rewarded at the altar, and the evil genius, the flinty-hearted baronet, banished to the caves of gloom and despair.

Exactly how all the novels and plays ended, and as true to life as most of them !

“ Agatha — here is our old friend Mr. Neider at last.”

“ I am glad to see that he has not disappointed us,” said she ; her gloved hand rested in my own, and she welcomed me as though I had been an old friend of hers as well as her husband's. The little knot of fashionables melted imperceptibly away ; and Nicholas Thirsk, saying,

“Take care of Mrs. Thirsk,” left me to pay my small civilities to the hostess.

There was only one topic on which I could discourse, or in which I could expect to interest her—her husband. I was well assured that she could grow eloquent on that theme, and that it would relieve the mutual embarrassments we felt.

Having congratulated her on attaining her majority, and wishing her the usual compliments, for which she thanked me, I alluded at once to Nicholas Thirsk. We were seated side by side then, near the orchestra.

“I am pleased to see so great an alteration in him.”

“Do you think that he has altered much?”

“Yes.”

“And for the better?”

“Certainly.”

“Sometimes I think so myself, and yet sometimes—” she paused, and then made a dart back to the old subject, “and he thinks so too. He is more at home of course than at Follingay farm—but they were,” with a little sigh that did not escape me, “very happy times for me.”

“All has ended as happily as a pleasant story-book,” I said.

“Yes—we are both very happy. Oh! there is nothing in the way of our felicity—he said there never should be. Do you think this a happy scene, now, Mr. Neider?”

“Judging by the surface of things, how can I doubt it?”

“Oh! I like my quiet evenings best,” she cried, with a girlish enthusiasm that was very winning and natural; “I am always very happy when Nicholas is at home with me and baby—Nicholas relating his adventures at the farm, or else reading to me—I like his own writings best.”

“Does he write much?”

“Very seldom,” said his wife, with another little sigh; “and he can write so well, if he likes. He don’t see the occasion, he says; and I believe sometimes the chance of being famous is slipping through his hands.”

“I must talk to him,” said I, half-jestingly.

“If you only would!” she cried, with an impulsive earnestness that startled me; “I am sure he thinks so much

of you, and all you say. He has told me twenty times how highly he holds you in his estimation, and you might have more weight with him than I."

"I am sure you over-estimate my power."

"If you would come some quiet evening, and coax him into the reading of a MS., now."

"I am so much his friend and confidant, that he has never confessed to me his literary abilities, Mrs. Thirsk."

"Indeed! And I have betrayed his confidence—how cross he will be, to be sure!" and she turned a shade paler at the thought.

"But I have heard that he possessed a talent for authorship, through a friend of his."

"Mr. Genny?"

"Yes."

"He will be here to-night."

"And Mrs. Genny?" I asked, eagerly.

"Yes—I think so. Heigho! a light-hearted, loving woman, with a cheering word for all—I wish I had her spirits."

This was a new subject to ponder over, as the music rang out again and the dancers flitted by. A light-hearted woman!—she who had been so grave and thoughtful, and hated frivolity. Everything round me was on the change, and only I retained my old austerity. Words that Harriet had said to me in the latter days, before the wedding ring was on her finger, came with full force upon me: "If we should ever meet again, you will find me in a new character—the true character, which I have hidden here." Did I treasure her every word so much, that, in the midst of all the gaiety around me, they recurred to me as forcibly as though they had been spoken in my ears that minute?

"You dance, Mr. Neider?"

"I have a misty reminiscence of some saltatory performances," I replied; "but I—I hope I am not keeping you from any participation in the general festivity."

"Oh! no—I have had enough dancing for this evening—but I was afraid of wearying you with my egotistical prattle, as Nicholas calls it."

"And I fear I am monopolising too much of the hostess's

attention," I said ; " and clashing against all rules of etiquette."

" Are you in favour of a strict observance of those rules, Mr. Neider ? "

" Well, I can't say that I am."

She dropped her fan into her lap, to clap her gloved hands with delight at my reply.

" I'll tell Nicholas that—I am glad that his Orestes or Damon whom he quotes so often, agrees with me in that. Would you believe that I make him quite cross at times, by what he terms my frightful impulsiveness ? "

" His cross fits were very evanescent, in my time."

" Oh ! he can be very firm and angry sometimes, like the rest of your sex," she said, " and make no allowance for the impulse that carries me a little way from the beaten track. He forgets it made a happy wife of me."

" And a happy husband of him, I am sure."

" Ye-es."

She was trifling with her bouquet now, and the white leaves of an exotic were drooping round her dress. She looked up, caught my observant glance and turned her head hastily away. Did she fear there was something in her face that might betray her ?

" Do you see that old gentleman entering the card-room ? " she asked, suddenly.

" The short old gentleman who stoops so much ? "

" The same. That is Sir Nicholas Thirsk, my husband's father."

" I am very glad to see him here," I ejaculated ; " it is a witness of a better understanding between the father and the son."

" Yes ; they are friends again. It was strange that the step which parted me from a brother I loved, should have reconciled Nicholas to a father who had been hard and unjust to him for many years. And if Richard were a little hard upon me now and then, he was never unjust."

Here was a chance to say a good word for Sir Richard Freemantle, and I had promised the worthy baronet to say it on the first opportunity that presented itself. If I could dispel a little of the mist, and bring brother and sister to a

better understanding of each other, I should have done good in accepting Thirsk's invitation.

"I hoped to have seen Sir Richard here?"

"My brother here!" she cried amazed; "whatever made you think Sir Richard Freemantle would be here? He objects to society."

"But he loves his sister, and she attains to-day an age of which he must have often thought and looked forward to."

"He would not have come if he had been asked," she said, speaking with great rapidity; "and I dare not ask him; Nicholas does not admire him much, and thinks a reconciliation between us would bring about much recrimination, quarrelling, everything but the good-will that might naturally be expected. I don't know—I think Nicholas must be right, although he speaks at times very bitterly of Richard."

"Forbidden ground, Mr. Neider!" said a sharp voice by our side, and the subject of our conversation stood looking at his wife with a less amiable expression of countenance than he had hitherto worn that evening, so far as my experience went.

"Forgive me, Nicholas dear; Mr. Neider passes so rapidly from one subject to another—and, in fact, Mr. Neider is to blame for mentioning the subject."

And she appeared rather relieved and delighted at having shifted the onus of responsibility on to my shoulders.

"What, have we a traitor in the camp?" he said, turning to me with the frown no longer on his brow.

"I hope not."

"You are ignorant of the rules governing us and our household gods," said he, lightly. "I think I must write somewhere about these rooms: 'No mention of Sir Richard Freemantle here, except on business of importance.' Neider, you are wasting too much time. I've been asked by half-a-dozen young ladies, who is the interesting young man with the bumps on his forehead, and the whiskers too big for him. You must dance, man, and be lively and do honour to the feast. This is a day to be marked with a white stone!"

He shook me by the shoulder in his excitement. On the

threshold of wealth and independence, he could afford to be a little extravagant.

"Come with me, and let me introduce you to a young lady with two thousand a-year. There's a wen under one ear, but it's only a little one."

"Nicholas!" said his wife, reproachfully.

"And that may be gilded, *mon brave*," he cried. "Agatha," turning to her, "bustle about, my girl, and don't mope any more in a corner, as if all the troubles in life had arrived with your coming of age. Neider, do you dance?"

"I believe so. It's so long——"

"Here, practise the next quadrille with Mrs. Thirsk. You're too nervous to distinguish yourself before the young lady I spoke of, at present. I shall be on the watch, and pounce down on you like a *Wehrwolf* of your own native land."

"That's England."

"Oh! your confounded German name always makes me think you of foreign extraction. Will you have any wine?"

"Not now, thank you."

"Run through a quadrille, then—I shall be your *vis-à-vis*, if I can manage it, if only for the sake of throwing you into a muddle."

He did manage it, but he failed in his object, even if he had ever intended it, of throwing me into confusion. I had a good memory, and Mrs. Thirsk and I being a side couple, I could take stock of our predecessor's manœuvres, and profit by them when my turn came. The quadrille finished, Thirsk having conducted his partner to a seat by his wife, put his arm through mine and hurried me away.

"What's the next movement, Thirsk?"

"Should auld acquaintance be forgot," sang he; "this way, Farmer Neider, for just a glimpse at another little world, where the head has more to do than the heels."

He drew me into the card-room, where a dozen guests or more were playing whist and loo. The whist party sat in a remote corner, with a table-lamp to themselves, and one of the four was Sir Nicholas Thirsk.

“Watch that ancient gentleman,” said Nicholas, pointing towards him.

“Well.”

“If he was playing whist for his soul, he could not be more eager,” remarked his son; “and his soul *is* in the hope of winning the five shilling stakes. You very seldom find a lover of fossils and bits of rocks such a *gourmand* at crown pieces. Now, guess who that gentleman is.”

“Sir Nicholas Thirsk.”

“Confound it! did Agatha tell you that?”

“Yes.”

“Upon my soul, she has given you a fair sketch of **every**thing and everybody in a little time. Did you ever meet with a girl who talked so much in your life?”

“She appears an artless, affectionate woman—you should consider yourself a lucky man.”

“So I am. Don’t I go down to the Tramlingford bank to-morrow, to draw therefrom, as her husband, the sum of sixty thousand pounds?”

“I mean lucky in your wife, not in her money, Thirsk.”

“She finds little fault with me,” he said, laughing; “and she thinks me a paragon and a wonderful clever being, blessed with three-fourths of the virtues under the sun, and only a quarter of the most respectable vices. By George! she’s right in one thing.”

“What is that?”

“You slip away, like an eel, from one subject to another—only a moment since I was speaking of my father.”

“And you led me away from the topic by a right-angled question.”

“As we were, then. You perceive my father and I are friends?”

“Yes.”

“He’s a cunning old gentleman himself, and the bold stroke I made for a wife hit his fancy, and brought him and his blessing together. He was kind enough to tell me that he always thought me too much of a fool ever to succeed in the world. Shall I introduce you?”

I drew back.

“Only my fun,” said Thirsk; “he’d curse me till my dying

day if I distracted him from his attention on the odd trick ; some other time, when the atmosphere is less charged with parental lightning. Presto—who sits at the loo-table yonder ?”

He gave a twirl to my arm, that nearly wrenched it from the socket, and brought me face to face with Robin Genny. He was sitting on the opposite side of the table, and had he looked up at that moment would have recognised me. There was the gamester’s look upon his face ; I fancied it was more haggard and lined with hard study than when I had seen it last, unless it was the excitement of the moment that seemed to have aged it wondrously quick. There was gold on the table, and the pursuit of gold will age a man more speedily than he bargains for.

“ This is the devil’s own table for sinners of magnitude—they play unlimited *loo* here.”

“ Is it a favourite game of Robin Genny’s ?”

“ I cannot say that it is, particularly—some one has asked him to join, I suppose. Robin Genny is a jolly good fellow, who always does what he’s asked. You look grave ?”

“ Indeed,” said I, with a start ; “ I was not aware of it. Do you think Robin Genny would come away if *you* asked him ?”

“ Very likely ; it was for that experiment I brought you into this unholy temple. He’s a poor devil, who can’t afford to be looed seven or eight pounds at a time—clever man as he thinks himself. By the god of thieves, he has won the pool !”

There was excitement at the table ; a flutter of rage, envy, and uncharitableness ; Robin Genny, not pale and haggard now, but radiant as a peony. Sir Nicholas was heard to mutter something about “ an infernal uproar ” over his cards.

“ Genny,” said Thirsk, sharply.

He looked up, smiled, and, with a half wrench of himself from the chair, came towards us.

“ Fortune favours the bold card-player,” said Thirsk ; “ here, profligate, behold our young and worthy farmer.”

He shook me heartily by the hand.

“ This is a meeting of old friends, relations and ac-

quaintances," said he. "I hope the world has been dealing fairly with you?"

"I can't complain," replied I. "May I expect the same answer from Mr. Genny?"

"I don't see why you should not," he said, "being in luck's way to-night. Blessed be the man who invented unlimited loo! Have you seen Harriet?"

"Not yet. I am anxious to pay my respects to her."

"Take care, Genny, this is an old rival."

"I can trust him," said Genny, shaking hands again; "and now, Thirsk, if you'll just—"

"If you'll just do the polite yourself, and not set me trotting about the room in search of your amiable helpmate, you'll be performing a more graceful act than your woolly brains contemplate just at this minute."

"You always were an impudent young beggar," said Genny, laughing. "This way, Mr. Neider; let us leave the scoffer to himself."

We passed into the ball-room, into the whirl of dancers, flitters, and gossips; where no shadows seemed to lurk, and where every serious thought was out of place amidst the dazzle of lights and harmony of music.

"He's doing it up grand," said Genny to me.

"He's what?"

"Coming out—Thirsk of ours."

"Ah! I understand."

"A lucky fellow in his way, but horribly extravagant," commented Genny; "never a thought for the morrow—a black lily of the field, neither toiling nor spinning."

His criticism on Thirsk reminded me of Thirsk's comments on him—both verdicts might verge upon the truth.

"*Halte là!*" cried he to me suddenly. "Harriet, a ghost from Follingay farm!"

She was sitting very thoughtfully in one of the recesses of the window—the heavy folds of its drapery half hiding her from the gay crowd. She did not appear light-hearted then, I thought—it was the face of the farmer's niece I looked at anxiously.

She was standing before me smiling the instant afterwards—the first and the true love!

## CHAPTER III.

MRS. GENNY.

SHE had not altered much, I thought. It was the clear frank face of the handsome woman I had ever known. It had always been—if I may term it so—all *unflinching* face; but it struck me as more apparent in that moment when a crowd of simperers and inanities were sweeping by. Yet there was nothing masculine in her face; it expressed woman's gentleness, forethought, sympathy, as much as it assured me that it was the countenance of one who would not give up at the first trouble, and cry *miserere*!

“I scarcely anticipated meeting so old a friend at Mrs. Thirsk's ball,” said she, shaking hands with me.

“Mr. Thirsk did not forget his brother-in-arms.”

“I should not have thought you would have cared for a party of this description, Mr. Neider.”

“Did she show any *penchant* for parties herself at Follingay farm?” interrupted Genny, with a laugh.

“Oh! it was a world where our true characters took time to develop,” said she; and then turning to me, “have you been dancing?”

“I have made one little attempt!”

“You are a most accomplished farmer!” she said, with a flash of her old brusqueness. “I should think your farm is likely to become a prosperous undertaking,” she added, in a lighter tone, “if you leave it two hundred miles behind, and seek such *réunions* as these.”

“This is my first appearance here, and this, you must remember, is an exceptional night.”

“For Mrs. Thirsk and her friends,” she added, drily, “from whom I hope I am not detaining you?”

“Oh, no!” I answered; “I am a straw on the sea of fashionable life, and glad to seek shelter by the side of a friend. Am I keeping you from dancing?”

“My dancing days are over, Mr. Neider,” said she, looking up with a laughing face towards her husband.

"I can persuade Harriet to attend these sorts of *soirées* now and then, Neider," he said, "but I can't make her do anything but sit and satirise the company,—like the crabbed old dowagers and the soured spinsters who sit with their bony backs against the walls of every ball-room."

"It is a new exemplification of the proverb concerning leading the mule to the water," said Mrs. Genny. "Robin, dear, what are you swaying from one foot to the other about, and looking so miserable?"

"Miserable!—that's a good one!"

"Have you been playing cards this evening?"

"Ye-es—a little."

"Well, you only promised to play a little; will you not sit down and keep Mr. Neider and me company?"

"Well, you see, I—I have left my cards on the table."

"Some one will soon take your place. What game were you playing?"

"Loo."

"For high stakes, of course?"

"Oh, no!—a few halfpence. I think I'll just finish my hand, Harriet."

"Very well, dear. You will remember that I don't wish to stay here too long?"

"I shall be back in a very few minutes."

"And if the gamblers become too excited, you'll think—oh! you'll think of the new dress you promised me last week!"

He laughed very heartily—even looked very affectionately towards her.

"You shall have twenty per cent. on the profits of the evening, my dear," said he, and hurried away.

I saw her look after him with a face that had lost all its smiles, till he disappeared between the curtains of the card-room.

"Loo was not a very expensive game, as we played it in the winter nights at Follingay farm, Mr. Neider?" said she, turning to me.

"No."

"These great friends of my Robin indulge in heavier stakes, I suppose?" she said, with a carelessness that implied

—almost too suspiciously—no particular interest in my answer.

“They may be rather more extravagant.”

Robin Genny had gone, and there was no bringing him back. I could not see an occasion to alarm his wife on the subject.

“Then Robin will be extravagant too; he is an excellent copyist,” said she, with a laugh that was new to me, for it was a forced laugh, and she had been above disguise in the times that were gone. “Farewell the flounced silk with which I sought to dazzle my neighbours!”

I laughed, too, at her remark. What a pair of hypocrites we were!

“Now, Mr. Neider, if you do not object to my distracting your attention from these waltzers, I should like to monopolise five minutes of your time.”

I took the vacant seat beside her, and whilst the music sounded, and the waltzers spun past, and all the giddy, fashionable world seemed verging on delirium, we spoke of farming life, like a couple of prosaic country folk.

“Your farm in Cumberland—you have decided on keeping it?”

“I have sold it.”

“Sold it!” she cried; “and given up farming life, after all your past assertions!”

“I have sold it, and invested my capital in a certain share of a farm belonging to William Grey.”

“Grey and you are partners?”

“Yes.”

“I am glad of that,” said she; “you could not have chosen a more sensible, practical, hard-working friend to offer you an example of honest perseverance.”

“You speak as if I was a poor, vacillating mortal, Mrs. Genny.”

“I meet you in a sphere above your own—I find you still the friend of a man who, whatever his virtues may be, has failings which are soon copied, and lead surely and swiftly to habits that must sap all principle. You may consider yourself a very firm-minded man, Sir, but the force of evil example will prove too strong for you.”

“I have confidence in my powers of self-command, even

were I the bosom friend of the gentleman whom you mistrust so much."

"I say he has failings," said Mrs. Genny—"that he is extravagant, and thoughtless, is led farther than he thinks, and leads others. Every story that I hear confirms me in my verdict."

"You speak severely."

"I may have cause," she said—then corrected herself hastily, "or I may soon have cause, if my voice be powerless to persuade my husband to give up his expensive acquaintance. A poor author, no more than a young farmer, can afford the luxury of a gentleman friend; one is likely to become envious of his good fortune, and tired of one's efforts to earn in a week what the evil example flings away in an hour. You will excuse me speaking like a friend to you?"

"Excuse you, Mrs. Genny?" I said—"I thank you for your interest—I shall think of your advice."

"You are a young man, and easily influenced."

"I am vain enough to think that you have made a mistake there," I replied.

She was thinking of the old days, when my heart was moved so deeply as to avow a love for her; from my actions in those days did she judge me ever a child, that a word might turn? It seemed so, and it irritated me. More, it assured me that she might judge falsely and hastily of others as well as myself, and take her views of life from misrepresented facts. She spoke bitterly of him beneath whose roof she sat there an invited guest—by whose example she feared her husband might be influenced.

"I daresay you wonder why I am here, Mr. Neider," she said, almost reading a portion of my thoughts.

"You appear to evince no particular affection for Mr. and Mrs. Thirsk."

"What do I know of them?"

"I—I thought Mr. Thirsk was a friend of Mr. Genny's."

"But not of mine. I have seen him but twice since my marriage—why should I evince any affection towards him? If pity be akin to love, I may soon clasp his childish wife to my heart."

“She is very happy, she assures me.”

Mrs. Genny gave a toss to her head—she would hear nothing in defence. For a woman ever light hearted, she was certainly out of temper that evening. And for a man who loved good temper in his friends, it was strange—it had been ever strange—what a wondrous charm her fretful moods had always had for me.

“Evincing no affection” (the words seemed to have aggravated her, she reiterated them so frequently), “you must wonder why I am here. Perhaps because it would have been very dull at home sitting up for Mr. Genny—perhaps because I take this opportunity of seeing an infatuated girl.”

“Infatuated?”

“Yes—Mercy Ricksworth, infatuated with her mistress’s merits—ready to die for her if necessary—and sounding ever her wondrous praises in my ears; as if a woman cared to hear the praises of another—as if it was the nature of our sex!”

She was becoming more angry every instant.

“What a jealous, cross woman I am growing!” she cried, impatiently, “to let a stranger like you see that I am envious of Mercy’s love for her mistress, and think it should have been mine by a natural right. The mistress loves and trusts in her—and Mercy is a girl to love and be loved; as impulsive as her mistress, and with almost as strange a view of life and life’s duties. Yes, I am a very jealous woman, and, for one whose own path is so clear of briars and pitfalls,” (did she speak then with a curling lip?—I fancied so)—“for one whose husband has never given her a single harsh word during sixteen months of wedlock, it is a little remarkable. If Robin would only scold me, and be more firm with me, and read me lectures on the spirit of uncharitableness with which I am possessed!”

She shook off her ill mood like a water drop, and talked of the ball, and the dancers’ dresses, and the dancers themselves—and uttered many remarks on passing things, with a pleasant *naïveté* that told me what an agreeable companion, and cheerful wife she was to Robin Genny.

And while I was thinking of that, she said suddenly:—

“Where’s this card-room?—are there any ladies there?”

“Do you think the love of gain, or of coveting our neighbours’ goods, is only confined to the masculine gender?”

“Perhaps not more than three-fourths of those weaknesses,” she said, caustically; “will you lend me your arm to the card-room?”

“You have really made up your mind not to dance this evening?”

“I am not fond of dancing.”

I offered her my arm, and we went together towards the card-room, at the door of which she turned angrily away.

“No—he musn’t think his wife can’t trust him!” she cried; then glanced nervously towards me, to see if I had caught her words—which I had, though I feigned to be intensely interested in steering my way through the guests.

“On second thoughts, I think I will take this opportunity of wishing Mrs. Thirsk many happy returns of the day,” said she; “we passed her a few minutes since.”

We turned and found Mrs. Thirsk gossiping pleasantly with some ladies; Harriet Genny drew her hand from my arm.

“Shall I see you again, to bid you good-night?” she inquired.

“I think so.”

“If not—good-night to you. I am glad to have met an old friend, and to have found him well in health, strong of will, and a man of the world.”

“And I am glad to have found you well and happy, if a little distrustful of my future steps.”

“I am not distrustful,” she replied; “you will work your way in the world, I hope. Do you take offence at a friendly warning—you?”

“God forbid!”

“Good-night, then.”

We shook hands and parted. I went immediately to the card-room.

She was Robin Genny’s wife, and beyond all hope of

mine ; but her thoughts I fancied that I could read, and they would trouble mine, and set me sharing them. She was fearful of her husband's strength of mind, although her woman's pride fought hard not to betray that fear to me, and lower him she had married in my eyes. If I could, after my own fashion, lure Robin Genny from the spell that kept him to the card-room !

He was playing unlimited *loo* still. There were six players at the table, five of them young men, one old and grey-haired. There was a little crowd of watchers of the game ; dancers, who had strolled in with their partners for a moment, and had become interested in the hard fight for the glistening heap of gold and silver in the centre of the table. The players were all pale and excited, with a strange fire in their eyes ; it had become a something more than play. In matters of life and death I had seen men less serious ; amongst actors in a barn, I had seen better attempts to appear easy in mind, and laugh in a natural manner. Robin Genny was not winning then. It was a scene that I was glad a wife's pride had spared the farmer's niece.

I went behind Robin Genny and laid my hand suddenly on his shoulder. Had it been the touch of a bailiff, he could not have jumped more.

“ Ah, Neider—what is it ? ”

“ If you have had enough of contesting Fortune's chances,” said I, “ come and drink a glass of wine with me. I am all alone in a world a trifle too civilised, and it's dull work.”

He glanced at me irresolute. He was one that might be led, I had been told more than once, and I was attempting the experiment. The players frowned at me as he sat with the pack of cards in his hands waiting to deal.

“ I'll be with you in a moment, Neider. Where's Thirsk ? ”

“ I don't know—I have lost him,” I replied ; “ we must look him up together—come on.”

“ I think I'll have my deal. Confound it, I have paid for that and my *loo* too, and have a right to a splash.”

There was a general laugh as he commenced dealing. I

heard one gentleman behind me whisper to a fair partner at his side—

“Genny, the author.”

“Genny—Genny,” said the girl, trying hard to remember the name.

“He’s a magazine writer and an essayist—one of the hard, dry species, whose genius you ladies do not properly appreciate. One of the soundest and clearest reasoners we have.”

“He seems very fond of cards,” she whispered.

It was a satire on clear reasoning, on practice and precept, that amused them both, and they turned away laughing very heartily. Meanwhile Genny had dealt, found nothing in his hand, thrown it aside, and was watching the progress of the game amongst those who had been blessed with better cards than he.

I touched him on the shoulder again.

“Now, Genny!”

He rose and left the table.

“Are you coming back again?” asked his neighbour.

“N—no, I think not. Haven’t I had enough of it?”

There was another hearty laugh, especially from those who had won. They almost split their sides laughing.

“The shorn sheep retires to think of the lost wool that would have made him warm and comfortable this cold weather. *Au revoir*, gentlemen!”

He bore his losses well—he went away laughing with the rest. He liked to see the world smiling at his jests.

“Have you been unlucky, Genny?”

“A little,” he said, carelessly; “nothing to go into deep mourning for. Let us have the wine—where did you leave Harriet?”

“Talking with Mrs. Thirsk.”

“I hope she’s making herself comfortable—she does not take kindly to evening parties and society in general. And the result of it is, she would make a hermit of me.”

“But the hermitage might be as pleasant as here.”

“She is a merry-hearted, busy, witty little helpmate,” said Genny with enthusiasm, “but one can’t be at home always, however much she may brighten it; and being a

scribe, why, one must spend half his life with the Lares. Ah, here is Harriet!"

Harriet, with her opera cloak drawn tightly round her as though she were cold, met us face to face.

"Were you coming for me?" he asked.

"For you?—no," she answered; "don't you think you can be trusted by yourself?"

He laughed at her light remark; he had forgotten the anxious look with which we had met her.

"Neider and I are going to have a glass of wine together—the reprobate comes like fate between me and my luck, and bears me away."

"Or like a guardian angel between you and desperation," said she, still laughing. But the lips only smiled—and what thoughtful eyes they were!

"Oh! he's too stout for an angel!" cried Genny; "what a jolly profession farming must be, to make all you fellows so wide. Why, I can see through my hand!"

And as he held it towards the light, I noticed how thin and almost transparent it was. At this moment a servant in livery touched me on the arm.

"You are Mr. Neider, I am told, Sir?"

"Yes."

"I am desired to give you this note," he said, with a reverential salaam, after tucking the salver under his arm.

I opened the letter, stared at the contents, looked at Mr. and Mrs. Genny.

"Not bad news, I hope?" said the author's wife.

"Not that I am aware of—I hope not. Will you excuse me?"

"We are going away soon. I do not think we shall wait for supper," said Harriet. "Shall we, dear?" turning to her husband.

"Well, just as you like."

"There are all the proof sheets at home; a large pile of them, Robin."

"Ah! yes—I don't think we shall wait supper, Neider."

So I bade them good-night, and I fancied that Harriet Genny parted rather coldly with me—too much like the

acquaintance of an hour. Did she resent my interference, or was she vexed that she had betrayed to me a desire to lure her husband from the card-table? One or the other I fancied, gave a distance to her speech and mien.

Outside the ball-room, and hesitating on the staircase, where the servants lounged, I met with a hindrance to further progress. Nicholas Thirsk came up the stairs, three steps at a time, in his haste to rejoin his friends.

“Well, Neider, what’s up?” he cried familiarly.

“I am going away for a little while. I have an appointment which I feel compelled to keep.”

“Strange!” said he, looking at me with a suspicion that I could not account for; “shall you be long?”

“I think not.”

“We sup at one o’clock. There will be a little speech-making, I expect, and the health of Mrs. Thirsk drunk with all the honours. You will not fail me?”

We drew out watches and compared the time. It was twenty minutes past eleven.

“I can promise, at least, to drink Mrs. Thirsk’s health at supper.”

“Thank you. I say!” he called, when I had made two or three steps down the stairs.

“What is it?”

“I shall put down the young lady with the wen for your especial escort into the supper-room.”

And his laughing face looked over at me as I descended the stairs, laughing too. It was the last bright look on it for many a long day!

## CHAPTER IV

BAD NEWS.

THE missive that had so suddenly hurried me from the house of Nickolas Thirsk contained but a few lines. It was headed "*Private*," and ran thus :—

“ DEAR SIR,

“ May I beg to see you for a few moments ? Business of *great importance* to me, and of still more importance to your friends, compels me to adopt this strange course. I shall be waiting for you at the corner of the first street to the left.

“ Yours, in haste,

“ RICHARD FREEMANTLE.”

Had it been written by one who was a stranger to me, I should have probably declined the mysterious meeting ; but that Sir Richard Freemantle desired an interview with me without a reasonable motive was not, at first sight, probable. I did not anticipate a revelation of any “great importance,” albeit Sir Richard had underlined the words ; but I could not in common courtesy dissent to an interview with the baronet, though he might have nothing more to deliver to me than a message of love and congratulations to his sister, from whose home her husband’s interdict debarred him.

I had some difficulty in finding the custodian of the hats and coats, in whom I recognised Mr. Ipps, formerly of Follingay farm. He was sitting in a small room near the entry, with his feet on the fender, and his knees almost between the bars. I think he must have been dozing, for, as I entered the room with the servant who was my escort, he started, and kicked the fire-irons noisily about the fender.

“ Now, old clumsy ! ” said the footman.

“ Now, young jackanapes ! ” returned he, with that old

readiness at retort which I had noted on my first meeting with him.

“This gentleman wants his hat and coat—and you’re asleep, as usual.”

“Ax the gentleman’s pardon.”

There were but a few great-coats in the room—the majority of guests having come from a short distance, and in their carriages. As I had intended to stay in London that night, and possibly the greater portion of the next day, my careful mother had not only pressed my overcoat upon me, but a whole portmanteau of luggage, which I had found, too late for restitution, at the bottom of the fly. Ipps had no difficulty in discovering my coat and hat, and I was retiring with that portion of my wearing apparel, when the old man touched me timidly on the arm.

“I’m not intruding, Measter Neider?” said he, wistfully  
—“I’m not too bould?”

“No—Ipps—what is it?”

“I should loike to know how the old Measter is?”

“Very well, I believe. I have not heard from him lately.”

“You may tell him, I made a blessed mess of cooming here—an ould dissatisfied deevil that I wor!”

“What good can I do by telling him that?”

“Oh! he’ll laugh a little, because he said Lunnon ways wouldn’t suit an old man of eighty-four. And he’s so maun pleased when his word cooms true.”

“I think you would have been better in the country, if—”

“If I could have kep’ honest,” he concluded, finishing my speech for me; “roight you be, Sir. But I couldn’t go on straight, and so it’s coom to this. Sarved out, Sir—just as the Bible said I should be.”

He returned to his seat by the fire, where I left him shaking his head to and fro, and muttering his complaints to an unsympathetic element.

I went into the hall, and down the broad steps into the street, where three cabmen, who had been lurking outside on the chance of a fare, made a desperate rush at me.

“Cab, ye’r honor!—cab, ye’r honor! — Hansom, ye’r honor!”

"I am going back again," I said, impatiently, as they danced round me, and swore at and jostled each other.

"Tho' gemman's ony half-sick of it yct. Come on Bill!"

And Bill and his confreres left me to pursue my way alone. At the corner of the next street the tall figure of Sir Richard Freemantle was plainly distinguishable. The baronet advanced to me with extended hand.

"Mr. Neider, I am obliged by your prompt response to my request."

"There is no obligation conferred, Sir Richard. Pray offer me no thanks."

"Here is a quiet coffee-house some fifty yards down the street—perhaps it will be better than talking out here in the cold. I am somewhat of an invalid, and cold weather don't agree with me."

He shivered as he walked by my side, and remained silent until we had reached the coffee-house indicated. Passing through its swing doors to a room at the back, more private than the first partitional compartment contiguous to the street, we took our places before a table, at which a waiter suddenly appeared for orders. After ordering coffee, Sir Richard removed his hat, unwound a voluminous comforter from his neck, and sat waiting patiently for the waiter's reappearance and retirement before he broached the subject that had brought me face to face with him. I removed my hat and waited with him. I noticed that he was extremely pale, and that his hands beat nervously upon the table, until the waiter had brought the coffee and left us to ourselves.

"Now, Mr. Neider," said he, setting the coffee hastily aside, "let me give you, in detail, that news which has confounded me, and which I wish you to communicate to your friend."

"Mr. Thirsk?"

"The same. The gentleman who forbids me his house, and refuses me an audience with my only sister—who, in this hour of trial to himself will not listen to a word of explanation."

"Have you seen him?"

"For a moment, by mere accident; but his pride would

not allow him to hear a word from my lips, and I—well, I have a little pride of my own left still ! ”

The baronet looked more sorry than proud, I thought ; I sat patiently waiting for the explanation that he seemed anxious to defer.

“ Last week I received a letter from Mr. Thirsk to the effect that he had given notice to the Tramlingford bank of his intention, as Agatha’s husband, to withdraw, the day after her majority, or as soon as the needful preliminaries could be arranged, the sum of sixty thousand pounds ; a sum bequeathed to her by my father, and lodged in the county bank, of which he had been a director, until such time as Agatha should reach her one and twentieth year. Do you follow me, Mr. Neider ? ”

“ Perfectly.”

“ As executor to that will, I wrote to the manager of the bank of Mr. Thirsk’s intention, and learned soon afterwards that your friend had already written to that effect to the manager also. All needful preliminaries were arranged, and there was nothing left but for Mr. Thirsk to receive the money when he should feel disposed to call for it, I thought.”

“ Thought ? ” I repeated.

“ Mr. Neider,” said the baronet, in a faltering voice, “ I received a telegraphic message to-day, informing me that the bank had stopped payment ! ”

“ Good Heaven ! ”

“ This was a despatch from a private friend of mine, who has awakened to the knowledge of a gigantic fraud, which the announcement of an intention to withdraw sixty thousand pounds from the deposit branch has brought suddenly to light. A fraud carried on systematically for years, and involving utter ruin to most people who have banked there. My friend followed his despatch by express train to-night, and has told me the whole story.”

“ This is very bad news, Sir Richard.”

“ Which I wish you to communicate to Mr. Thirsk as quickly—even as gently, as possible. It must be as great a blow to *him* as can possibly occur, and one for which, in his egotism and extravagance, he is wholly unprepared. I would caution you and him from too sudden a disclosure of

the news to Agatha—she is a girl who has hardly known a disappointment, and would, I fear, bear but indifferently any serious shock. You will see," he added, anxiously, "that the tidings are broken to her gently?"

"I will do my best—I have no influence with the family."

"You are his friend."

"I meet him to-night for the first time since his marriage."

"By invitation?"

"Yes."

"I will call you his friend, then—at least he will hear more from you than me, and hear more graciously. You will warn him concerning Agatha?"

"Certainly."

"I am deeply obliged to you, Mr. Neider; I—I don't think I need detain you any longer. I have made you the bearer of very sad news, but I think it is news that cannot be told too soon."

"May I ask if you banked there to any extent, Sir Richard?"

"I have lost a few thousands," he said, quietly; "fortunately I have not lost all—thanks to my landed estate, and my investments in government securities. And fortunately for more than myself—I—I wonder if he will see a hidden motive even in that now?"

He bit his finger nails for a moment nervously, then said hastily,

"You may tell Mr. Thirsk that any embarrassments which the stoppage of the bank may necessarily involve, I shall be happy to do my best to assist him from. And that I am sorry—there, that's all."

"It is strange news to communicate on such a night as this," I remarked; "I will do my best to break it to him cautiously. But I have no great confidence in my powers, Sir Richard."

"You will excuse me making you the bearer of this news, Sir," said Sir Richard, courteously.

I implied as much by a bow.

"I saw your face in the crowd after my interview with my friend," said he, "but I did not think of you again till

Mr. Thirsk broke from me with an oath, and a taunt upon the mean servility that had brought me there in the zenith of his fortune. Then with some difficulty I bribed a servant to convey my pencilled note to you, and—you are here. There is the telegraphic message I received," passing it across the table.

"I can't help thinking that this news would last till the morning," said I, irresolutely, as I secured the message in my pocket.

"Ill news grows apace. Mr. Thirsk may have incurred responsibilities, and find a crowd of harpies on him in the morning, and know not where his best friends are. I shall be here all day to-morrow."

He implied by that his wish to be considered the best friend of his sister's husband; I believed that he was, and felt more sorry than ever for the enmity that Thirsk appeared to bear him. If the story ended with a better understanding between this seemingly phlegmatic, but really warm-hearted man, had Nicholas Thirsk and his wife encountered so heavy a misfortune?

I left Sir Richard at the table in the coffee-room, and went back towards the mansion. All was light and life still in the house to which I was advancing with my evil news; I could hear the music streaming out into the night—see, as I looked up, the shadows of the dancers on the blind. Feasting and revelry held domination there; the careless hearts above knew nothing of the thunderbolt launched at their host, and all his dreams of greatness. Standing on the brink of ruin, with the great abyss below, the full-hearted host recked not of the card-built castle that had gone down the gulf before him.

## CHAPTER V.

## BEFORE SUPPER.

STANDING outside the ball-room door, a new thought struck me like a pistol-shot. Matthew Genny, of Follingay farm, near Welsdon in the Woods ! He had spoken of the Tramlingford bank ; he had banked there for many years—his faith was greater in it than in the Bank of England—how had the stoppage of the firm affected him ?

They were questions that I could not answer, and I had a task of no small difficulty before me. For the present, I must set aside all thoughts of my old tutor in the art of farming, and bend my energies to warn Nicholas Thirsk of the storm that would descend upon him ere he was twenty-four hours older. I passed into the rooms, looking at my watch as I entered. It was twenty minutes past twelve ; I had been gone an hour.

It seemed as if Nicholas Thirsk had been awaiting my return, for he was standing before me the next instant, with a lady on his arm.

“ Mr. Neider,” said he, with extraordinary gravity, “ I have been fortunate enough to obtain Miss Winkington’s consent to your desire for an introduction to her—she is disengaged for the next waltz. Miss Winkington—Mr. Neider ; Mr. Neider—Miss Winkington ! ”

I stared from Nicholas Thirsk to Miss Winkington—for a few moments I did not perceive the force of Thirsk’s joke, till my startled vision became aware of a formidable wen under the left ear of the lady. It was the heiress whom he had already recommended me !

At another time I might have appreciated the jest, and the solemn manner in which Thirsk supported it, but I was embarrassed, and the contrast between my thoughts and his was acutely painful.

“ I—I wish a word with you, Thirsk—I must speak to you for a moment.”

“ I shall be most happy after the next dance—the music

has begun again—Mr. Neider, I leave in your hands the most graceful dancer in the room."

"Naughty flatterer!" cried the lady with the wen.

"Upon my honour!" and, grave as a judge, Thirsk left me to my own resources.

There was no help for it—dance I must, and with a young lady who gave me the horrors every time I caught sight of her. It was a peculiar position—certainly the most miserable fifteen minutes I was ever likely to spend. With a load at my heart, and the knowledge of what blighting news I had to communicate, to be waltzing round a ball-room with a malformed partner, who had been told the most extraordinary account of my desire to be introduced to her!

Whether she waltzed indifferently well that night, or my feet were as heavily laden as my spirits, or the wen had something to do with it, it was certain that we laboured round the ball-room in the most lumpish and clumsy manner possible to conceive—bumping against more agile partners, falling over each other's feet, causing no small amusement to the lookers-on, and great indignation to those parties with whom we came into a violent collision. If Miss Winkington would only have become disgusted with me and the attention we commanded—if the band had not played the waltz so many times over—if I could have even brought one of my heels with full force on her instep, and crippled her *pro tem!* But she persevered, and panted and clung to me, till the last note sounded forth and the dance was over.

"It's dreadfully warm, Mr. Cyder!" observed my interesting partner, as I offered her my arm to escort her to a seat.

"Very, Miss Winkington."

"The rooms are overcrowded—don't you think so?"

"I certainly do."

"I wonder the windows are not open. They have opened them in the refreshment room, and it's delightfully cool there."

"Is it, indeed?"

But I was not to be inveigled into the refreshment room; under any other circumstances, I should have been the

most gallant, the most attentive of partners. But I was anxious to see Thirsk and end this burlesque, so with a "thank you" for the favour conferred, I left Miss Winkington on a seat by the wall. The contraction of a pair of very bushy eyebrows is a reminiscence with me yet, and associated with other, sterner incidents of that memorable night.

I found Thirsk after some difficulty, and seized him by the arm.

"Hollo! — here so soon! Have you enjoyed your dance?"

"Never mind the dance—I wish to tell you something."

"Not now—I—"

"Thirsk, I must tell you what I have heard!" I cried.

"Out with it, then! — is there murder abroad?"

"Not quite so bad as that."

"Speak, Sir Oracle!"

"Not here."

And I gave a scared look at the visitors promenading to and fro during the intervals of the music. He began to see that there was really something serious to relate, and led the way out of the ball-room, and along a passage to a dimly-lighted study on the same floor.

"It's not a long tale, Neider?"

"No."

"Short and sour—go on!"

"Are you prepared for bad news, Thirsk? — very bad news?"

"It must be news of awful import to scare me to-night," he said, looking anxiously towards me, as if to read the secret on my face.

"I received a message an hour and a half ago to meet Sir Richard Freemantle in the street."

"Curse it! — why didn't I guess that that hound was at the bottom of it? He has been here once, but I have baffled him. I have sworn never to be friends with that man—and it is my turn to wring his heart. What has he told you, Neider? — and why do you hang back like this?"

"Because you will not guess at the shadow of a possible blow to you. Because your wife's brother came in all good

faith, and you would not listen to him, and spare me being the bearer of bad news."

"Well—I am prepared!"

He turned white then, and waited for my revelation. I believe a suspicion of the truth for the first time came across him.

"The Tramlingford bank has stopped payment!"

"So—so—so!" he repeated to himself, and his arms fell to his side like a dead man's; "that's news indeed!"

"My dear Thirsk, you will not let it dash you utterly down!" I cried; "it is not news of death or illness to anyone you love—it *might* have been worse."

"No."

"It might have——"

"I say No to all—don't try any fool's consolation with me; I never cared for it—it never affected me in much less trouble! Just finish the story," he cried with a stamp of his foot.

"Since receiving the telegraphic message——"

"Where is it?"

I placed it in his hands, and without looking at it he waited for me to continue.

"Since receiving the message," I began again, "Sir Richard's friend has arrived by the express train from Tramlingford, and entered fully into details. There has been a misappropriation of funds, a long series of artful defalcations, a reckless speculation with depositors' money, winding up, as all such things must wind up, with exposure and ruin!"

He echoed my last word, and then read the telegraphic message carefully.

"Dated half-past five o'clock at Tramlingford. That is too late for the evening papers."

"Yes."

"Well—go on."

"That's all."

"I think it's enough," he said; "and now, Neider, your congratulations."

I did not understand him, and looked my ignorance.

"Your congratulations at my stoicism—this comes of

being prepared. This is not like the Follingay farm times, when I was uncommonly quick at an explosion."

"No."

"I can hardly make it out myself," he said ; "I don't realise the fact in all its grimness. I've been stunned with a heavy blow, and am not recovered yet. That's quite all, you say ?"

"Excepting a few words from Sir Richard Freemantle. Shame on me if I had forgotten them !"

"Let me have his message."

"That any assistance you may need in the sudden misfortune which has befallen you, he will be happy to afford—he is most anxious to afford."

Thirsk exploded at this. There was no longer any further reason to admire his powers of self-restraint. He called down all the curses of Heaven on his brother-in-law's head, and wished every evil on earth might swoop upon him for his meddling.

"Does he taunt me with his wealth again, in the very face of the ruin that he tells me of ?—does he think me a coward, that will spurn him in my seeming affluence, and cringe to him at the first shock of the storm ? May my hand wither, when I touch his own, or receive a farthing of that money which he flaunts before me as a panacea for the deadly ill he brings me news of ! May the devil fly away with him !"

"This is not stoicism, Thirsk—more, it is not gratitude."

"My debt of gratitude to him was paid long ago—but my debt of hate is eternal."

"Well—what is to be done ?"

"We will go on with the feast, and keep the natal day of Mrs. Thirsk."

The mocking look was in his eyes again—the mocking face was that which I had looked at, in the farming days, when he was chafing at the barriers in his way.

"But the natal day was yesterday, and the new day is an hour old, and ruin has come with it, and the supper waits. There's one striking."

"Shall I excuse you to the guests ?"

"Excuse me !" he cried. "Do you think I am a child to

sit moping in a corner because the enemy has snatched my cake away. I have a part to play, Alf Neider, and you shall see me play it to perfection."

There was a wild glitter in his eyes, that might almost indicate insanity; his mood was reckless, and I knew how little he cared for form and ceremony in it. For anything wild and extravagant he was prepared—I saw it in his face. I told him so.

"It may be my only chance of getting up a sensation for all time to come," he said.

"You will not be rash and foolish. The news may not be so bad in the morning. You have received no official intelligence, as yet, of the disaster."

"Please to let me pass," he said, haughtily. "I presume I am not to be made a prisoner in my own house."

"I have no power to make you one."

"Don't you wish you had?"

"If you think of perpetrating any foolish act that can but insult your guests, and bring no credit to yourself, I wish that I had the power, Thirsk."

"The guests will flout me in the streets three days hence. Not a single craven amongst them would welcome me at their homes."

"Still they are your guests—asked in all fairness—to be treated fairly."

"Do you think I am going to spring a mine—*à la* Guido Fawkes?"

"I wouldn't be answerable for any extravagance in this mood of yours."

"I see you are beginning to understand me," he said, with a short laugh.

"I wish I had the key to the better nature that I know is in you, Thirsk."

"The better nature is cast off, and the key sunk in a black river. I believe neither in Heaven, nor Hell, nor justice, nor God's blessing on repentant sinners, from to-night."

"Thirsk, this is cruel blasphemy!"

"Wise men, who fancy they know more of retributive justice than most people—reverend old humbugs, who see the hand of Providence in everything, will say that this

is a judgment upon me—a fair end to the foul scheming began years ago. There are such things as judgments, I suppose?—do you know anything about them?"

"Judgments on what?"

"Marrying for money. Sacrificing the heart and the heart's best affections—if there are such commodities—at the altar of Mammon!"

"Do you own it?" I asked, sorrowfully.

"Yes. Alfred Neider, puritan, [moralist, and farmer, I own it. I married Agatha Freemantle for money, blinding myself with the belief that I loved her a little in my own way, and that it was not all self-interest which led me in pursuit of the heiress. I might have been blind all my life, if this devil of ill-luck—there is such a devil as that always on the watch for us—had not torn the bandage from my eyes. I married her for money!"

"I will not believe anything you say to-night."

"I married her for money!" he repeated again; "she was worth sixty thousand pounds, and that would have made a man of me. I have been kind to her for her money—I give this fête to-day, not because she is one-and-twenty, but that I hoped to shake away the fetters at my heels, and step forth into society a rich man. And I am balked, and society will laugh at me!"

"If you *would* only let me say that you are unwell, and——"

"Let me be," he interrupted, "I have every confidence in myself. What I do shall be done like a gentleman, not like a butcher. Who's there?"

A hand without tapped upon the panels of the door.

"If you please, mistress wishes to know if you will be long, Sir. It is past one."

"I know it, scaramouch," was the uncomplimentary rejoinder; "now, Mr. Neider, *apres vous*."

I still hesitated.

"You are a strangely suspicious mortal—forward!"

"What do you intend?"

"Nothing, nothing—haven't I heard you say that you are an admirer of William Shakspere's works?"

"I daresay you have."

"That's a grand satire on money worshippers and against sycophants—that Timon of Athens, Neider."

“What of it?”

“Nothing much—you remember the wind-up in the third act?”

“What of it?” I repeated.

“A grand dash at the dish-covers, and a denunciation to the purpose on the heads of the many who would have fattened at the host’s expense, and fallen down at his feet to worship him.”

“Did he act like a gentleman?”

“Ah! for the times that he lived in. I am Thirsk of Bedford Square—not Timon of Athens!”

He passed his arm through mine, and led me along the passage, and back into the ball-room. I was distrustful of him still—doubtful, after all, if the shock of his loss had not been a little too much for him.

At the door of the ball-room Mrs. Thirsk met him with a wondering face.

“Nicholas, dear—where have you been?”

“Playing at nine-pins with Mr. Neider.”

“What?”

And the young wife stared at him, as she well might.

“And Neider’s beaten me. Such a floorer in one throw—you should have seen it—it would have vastly amused you!”

“Shall I give the signal to open the doors of the supper-room?”

“By all means—our guests look hungry.”

They were standing in groups about the room, laughing and talking. Those who had come for supper especially—there are such social wolves—were becoming a little impatient.

“Neider, may I place Mrs. Thirsk under your charge?”

“With great pleasure—but—”

“But my best friends have a right to take the best position—I have only a few more honours to bestow in this life.”

When Mrs. Thirsk’s hand rested on my arm, he said—

“By the way, I had forgotten Miss Winkington—if you have any *penchant* in that direction, I will waive my own desires.”

“No,” I said.

It was grim jesting, and Thirsk's pleasantry at that time made my blood run cold.

"Don't be frightened," I heard him whisper behind me, as we passed into the supper-room.



## CHAPTER VI.

NICHOLAS THIRSK, in anticipating his wife's inheritance, had not spared money to give *éclat* to the festival. For a man whose capital was even sixty thousand pounds he had been in no small degree extravagant, for he had rented a house, and started in life in a style more conformable to sixty thousand a-year. How much of his wife's supposed fortune he had forestalled, and what interest there was to pay on such forestalment, I did not know ; but, judging by appearances, I could guess that the amount was large, and wonder in what manner he thought of meeting it.

Sad and striking the exemplification of the old trite proverb—the cup to the lip, and the hand of Fate to dash it away. In a nature so ungovernable and wild as Thirsk's what would follow so cruel a disappointment ? In our shallow judgment of what is good and best—the worldling's estimate of the wisely-hidden acts of Him who is above all worlds—the trials that are sent to us seem often ill-chosen and incomprehensible. Here was a nature, as I fancied, that could not bear trials ; that took darker shadings in its hour of trouble, and rebelled and cursed a chastening hand ; that only with fortune smiling on it was fair and equable. I could but shudder at the changes that would come to Thirsk and to her who trusted in him for her happiness. And, God forgive me, I could but see in the result much inevitable evil.

It was a strange contrast—the parade of wealth before

me, and the actual poverty of him who had brought together these atoms of a world too high for him ; the outward signs of all that could add to happiness—wealth and position—and the unspeakable hidden misery of that dark-faced man at the head of the table. Once when there was a burst of laughter—hearty and genial—at the sally of a witty guest, I saw Thirsk turn with a frown in the direction of the jesters, as though the laugh at his own ruin and presumption had suddenly rung out from the revellers. But it was a frown that passed away like magic, and he was the courteous, smiling host again, at ease with himself and his little fashionable world.

I could not keep my eyes from him ; his was a character in which I had been always interested, and the singular attraction that had drawn me to him seemed to have tenfold force that night. He was one trembling on the brink of ruin, and I had not the power to save him—could but sit there passively, and see him vanish to the lower depths.

Meanwhile the supper proceeded, the guests became talkative and noisy—horribly discordant must their voices have rung in Thirsk's ears, if there were any reflex of my feeling in his heart—the wine flowed freely, the servants flitted to and fro, and seemed ubiquitous.

I was just conscious that all this gay, bright scene was before me, as a man is conscious in a dream ; but my whole thoughts were concentrated in Thirsk, whose glance I was anxious to attract. He must have seen my efforts, though he took no heed ; to the lady at his side he was more than commonly attentive and conversational—but the light in his dark eyes was the mocking fire that had awakened at my news, that I had seen in the old farming days, when he was scheming for the fortune that now, in the hour of his triumph, had shrivelled into nothingness.

“What is the matter, Mr. Neider ?”

I had forgotten Mrs. Thirsk till her hand lightly touched my arm.

“I beg pardon—matter ?—nothing !” I stammered forth.

“You are looking unusually grave.”

“My friends tell me that I am over-dull and thoughtful in

company," I replied. "It is a bad habit, of which I am trying to break myself."

"But—but Nicholas—something is the matter with *him*. Surely you and he have not quarrelled during that long conference before supper?"

"We are very good friends, I assure you."

But the wife had had experience of the lights and shadows of Nicholas Thirsk's moods, and was quick to read them. Her heart had long been in the study of them, and her husband could not deceive her as he deceived his guests. She read the change that had recently come over him accurately enough—and she feared it. More, she made an effort to learn it, and be prepared to resist a trouble, or to share one.

"You are evasive, Mr. Neider," she said, reproachfully.

"Have I anything to evade?"

"I think so. I think," she added, "that you two *have* quarrelled; that in his hasty and sharp way—which is not natural, and should not be construed too quickly—he has said something to offend you, and that you have retaliated with more warmth than he thought befitting the occasion. If—"

"My dear Mrs. Thrisk, I assure you that your husband and I are the best of friends."

"You have told him some bad news then. Ah! you colour!"

"Mr. Neider," said a voice from the other end of the table, "let me have the pleasure of drinking wine with you, It was my father's custom, and out of place or not, I set the fashion here."

So I drank wine with Mr. Thirsk, who gave me a very peculiar look over the wine glass he held in his hand—significant of a hint not to concern myself with his affairs at present. I think Mrs. Thirsk must have received a portion of that glance and taken it to herself, for she remained silent after her husband and I had exchanged civilities.

But she kept watchful, and the result of her observations did not tend to calm her. Taking wine became the fashion at that table, and more than one of the guests who challenged the hostess, must have noticed how suddenly white the heroine of the night had become. I took a careful

survey round the table for the first time. Robin Genny and his wife had departed, Nicholas Thirsk's father was shovelling in pastry like a gourmand, and the wondering face of Ipps was peering through a half-open door. Yes, it was strangely like dream-land—if Farmer Genny, or Grey, or even Peter Ricksworth, had peered from behind window curtains, or taken up a position in the room, my surprise would not have been great. In my stunned condition of mind, I could believe in anything remarkable—and in my fear of how the evening would end, I was prepared for anything extravagant.

There was a clattering of the silver forks, a buzz of voices demanding general attention, a long-moustached, big-whiskered dandy standing up half-way down the row of guests that faced me, and looking towards my end of the table. There was a talk about charging glasses—then a long unprofitable speech, which lasted till the guests were weary, and the wine was flat. I shall never forget that speech, or my sensations during its delivery, or the steady watch which Thirsk kept upon the speaker, glinting from beneath his contracted brows so scornfully. If I could have stood up myself and given a war-whoop in the midst of the oration, I should have been infinitely relieved.

The speaker, of course, proposed the health of Mrs. Thirsk—turned a happy period about coming of age, and made some vapid jesting about years of discretion, and some practical maundering as to crossing boundaries of life and stepping forth to the Beyond! He spoke with an overweening consciousness as to being the fit and proper person to represent the guests assembled there; and with that ease and confidence significant of one of those commonplace, twaddling, insufferable, supper-party bores, that we run against so often, and secretly anathematise so heartily. This man would *not* sit down; he was vain of his eloquence, and of attracting general attention, and he persisted to the last in passing from grave to gay, from serious to severe, running the whole gamut of speech-making, and embracing every style to evince his versatility. Had the man been a machine, turned by a handle behind, he could not have ground on more regularly and monotonously.

I have always entertained the idea that had this man simply proposed the health of Mrs. Thirsk, and sat down in a fair and proper manner, Thirsk's morbid fancies would have at least been restrained until the departure of the guests. His return to the company seemed in a degree to have restored him to his proper self, and afforded him a notion as to the respect due to those whom he had assembled there. But the speaker's oration darkened Thirsk's countenance more and more, and when he spoke of the esteem they all entertained for their fair hostess, of her merits, accomplishments, even, in the most execrable taste, of the fortune that awaited her from that day—for the story of the legacy was no secret—I saw Thirsk's hands fidgeting at his white neckcloth, as though it were a trifle too tight to breathe in comfortably just then.

The speaker sat down amidst uproarious cheers, and there was a general rising to the feet and drinking of Mrs. Thirsk's health, with all the honours due to so important an occasion. *Hip! hip! hurrah!* and long life, happiness, health, and wealth to the blushing, agitated hostess at the end of the table!

Then there came a pause, a rustling into seats, and one figure left standing to reply to the mass of verbiage that had been recently delivered—a dark-faced, slim figure, that faced her whose virtues had been thus loudly trumpeted. The eyes of all the guests were turned towards him, and he waited till one could have heard a pin drop before he began his speech, in tones cold, cutting, and unvarying.

"In rising to return thanks," he said, "for the great compliment which you have paid my wife, I feel somewhat at a loss as to the necessary form wherewith to reply. If I accept all the speaker's praises for Mrs. Thirsk, I shall scarcely be acting justly to her or to myself; if I endorse his opinion of our wealth, and of that happiness which the speaker knows so well wealth alone *can* bestow, by simply thanking him, I shall have misled all these dear and valued friends who have come hither to testify to their appreciation of our virtues."

All eyes were turned towards him; the ladies did not seem to comprehend him, the gentlemen whose wits the wine had not bemuddled began to lean forward with faces

of more gravity ; Agatha Thirsk sat clutching the table and staring as at a phantom ; my heart kept thumping under my waistcoat, with a force that aggravated me.

“ I say *our* virtues,” he continued after a pause, and a glance towards his wife, “ for Mr. Dewby has been pleased more than once to introduce me into his speech as the amiable and talented partner of that lady whose health has been so generously drunk. And I talk about misleading you, because the morning papers will inform you of a little *contretemps*, which for me to conceal to-night would be hypocritical and ungracious. Hypocritical, for I cannot speak of the pleasure of seeing you, or of my belief in all your warm assurances, or of the happy day that this will be for Mrs. Thirsk to look back upon in the future years hidden from us both. Ungracious because I should deprive you of a sensation, and leave for a vulgar and ignoble press the first relation of that news in which I am sure you will be interested, which you will like to talk about and speculate concerning its ulterior result. The news has arrived, fortunately for you, unfortunately for me, at an hour somewhat late ; but I have no wish to keep all these *friends*” (how bitterly he spoke here !) “ longer in the dark than necessary. I beg, unaffectedly, again to express my doubts of all the blessings promised by the last speaker, and to inform you that the bank in which all our property is invested has come to an untimely SMASH ! Had I not been as sure of your support as of your sympathy” (he looked a mocking devil then !) “ I might have hesitated in this declaration ; but I have a faith in man’s professions, and am ready at any moment after this to entertain them as heartily as I thank you, ladies and gentlemen, for the honour and praise awarded to her who bears my name.”

There was a momentary dead stillness, then blank amazement followed the return of Thirsk to his seat—and then confusion, dismay, and agitated whispers. In polite society the surface is ever so glossy, and the gaudy cockle-boats thereon are framed for such eternal fairness of the atmosphere, that this sudden rising of an opposing element threw everything into confusion. And in the midst of it Thirsk’s voice rang out again :

“ I hope, ladies and gentlemen, you will not let this trifle

interfere with your amusement: the ball-room is quite deserted, and the musicians await your pleasure."

At the same moment Agatha Thirsk fainted, and one or two ladies screamed out and ran to her assistance; the guests rose and huddled their opera-cloaks round them, or shook themselves in their dress-coats, preserving ever the same bewildered air. Thirsk's father shuffled to his son's side and asked a few questions, which were lightly replied to, and baffled the inquirer. But the tide of fashion swept back from the ruined man, and the music that sounded in the ball-room was played to empty walls.

From the house the carriages were already rattling away—it was a ruin, and to be fled from, ere in the heat of the moment and the champagne, rash pledges should be made, that would be repented in the cool morning. One or two, inclined to leave gracefully, went to Thirsk and shook hands, and expressed their regret at the news; and he bowed and smiled, and thanked them for their condolence, and looked straight over their heads at the opposite side of the room.

Suddenly there were Mercy Ricksworth in the room, and Mrs. Thirsk passing therefrom, leaning heavily upon her arm, the cotton print and white silk in singular juxtaposition; and still the guests kept streaming rapidly away down stairs, and blocking up the entrance-hall, and the band was braying yet in the deserted ball-room.

Thirsk and I were left alone at last—even the father had stolen down stairs with the rest, and left the host to his new world. Thirsk might have waited for the daylight, but he chose to unmask and step into it with an air of bravado; his sins be on his own head,—rank and fashion had done with him!

"A plagiarism on Timon of Athens, Neider."

"An eccentric step, at least."

"But Timon was left without one friend—and you—you don't go with the rest!"

"Do you expect me?"

"I have lost all faith to-night. Two hours ago I had faith in being a rich man—you see. *Stop that row!*" he shouted, with his old vehemence through the ball-room doors, and his voice rose over the harmony and quelled it.

"Can I assist you in any way to-morrow—be your messenger, accountant—"

"Creditor?" he added.

"To the extent of my poor abilities," I said.

"By God!—you're a good fellow!"

And he wrung my hand in his, till I winced again.

"But I'll have nothing to do with you!" he said vehemently. "I've played my part and you yours—and here on the verge of the bright sphere from which I am slipping, I bid you farewell, like the rest! Come no more!"

"But I *shall* come, till I find you in a better mood."

"What is a better mood?"

"Looking at this misfortune in a different light; becoming more resigned to the change, and, pardon me, more hopeful in your efforts to make home and wife happy."

"Why the devil didn't your father make a parson of you?" he scoffed; "you waste your sweetness on a farming air."

Before I could reply, he cried—

"And what mean you by 'more resigned?' Haven't I been a philosopher to-night?—played the stoic, and the polite Diogenes, in the face of a loss that might have dismayed the foul fiend?"

"It's an odd sort of resignation—don't let us talk of it just now."

"Bid me good-bye, then!"

"Are you not anxious to see how Mrs. Thirsk is?"

"Time enough for the heiress! What's her loss to mine do you think—her cares to her husband's?"

"You will offer her the best of examples presently, Thirsk. I wish I could leave you as confident in your powers to meet this storm, as so many men have met it before you."

"Braver and better men of whom I know nothing!—good-bye!"

"Good-night."

"Good-bye!" he reiterated; "I'd say 'for ever,' like a stage ranter, if I knew what it meant."

We shook hands and parted. As I went out of the

room, I saw him drop into the seat whence he had risen to return thanks, clutch his head between his hands, make room for his elbows amidst the fragments of the feast, and think of the life that lay before him.

And I could but think of it too and fear it, and pray that it might be brighter than I feared.

END OF THE FOURTH BOOK.

## BOOK V.

### SLAVES OF THE RING.

‘ Poverty, sweet husband,  
Oft time hath been blamed,  
But poverty with honesty  
Never yet was shamed.  
The rich man discontented  
May be a poor man named.’

ROXBURGHE BALLAD.

“ Albeit our thoughts  
Be verily bitter as self-sacrifice,  
We’re no less selfish.”

ELIZABETH BARRETT BROWNING.

## CHAPTER I.

## TWO VISITORS

NICHOLAS THIRSK was quick in his movements. After affording him opportunity to resolve into form his ideas for the future, and giving myself time to appear less like an intruder and more like a friend, I discovered that Thirsk had taken advantage of the interim to disappear from Bedford Square. I made every inquiry in the neighbourhood, but his future movements had been kept to himself, and the mystery of his whereabouts was beyond my power to penetrate. A sale had been called, and all the costly furniture sold off, and Nicholas Thirsk and family were far beyond my ken. Having taken no small trouble to elicit the fact that he was not arrested for debt—so far as my inquiries could extend—I set myself to study the newspaper, and glean from the account of the suspension of the Tramlingford bank how much salvage from the wreck of a fair fortune might save my impetuous friend—in his difficulties then, I considered him my friend—from present distress, supposing that not one helping hand was extended towards him.

It was a sad and a cruel story that of the Tramlingford bank. The story that starts before us once or twice in the same number of years—as though there was a law of knavery, by which great knaves were governed. A breach of trust, and misappliance of capital, the temptation to grasp at heavy fees, and to speculate rashly in other people's money—the whole sordid spirit of self overruling conscience, honour, and God's laws, and winding up in discovery and shame.

There was a probability of a director or two being transported, and the capital of the bank producing something like two shillings in the pound—a matter of six thousand pounds in lieu of sixty thousand, falling to the share of Nicholas Thirsk. That his debts were at least equal to the former sum, I had no doubt concerning.

Some three or four months after the party at Bedford Square, the announcement that the bank would pay two shillings in the pound appeared in the public papers ; and the day following this notice there came a visitor to our suburban farm.

“ By George ! who do you think is coming up the path ? ” cried Grey, who was looking from the farm-house window.

“ I dont know. Who ? ”

“ It’s Genny—our old master, Neider,” cried Grey. “ I thought that he had forgotten the couple of us, long ago ! ”

My mother instantly began dusting and tidying, after the fashion of her sex. A sudden arrival was sure to throw her into a violent state of flurry ; and Grey, having a number of affectionate brothers and sisters, was always the cause of considerable excitement to my mother.

“ It’s the only thing I don’t like in Mr. Grey, my dear,” said my mother in confidential moments ; “ he has such a very large number of relations. Poor dear, perhaps it isn’t his fault, though.”

In due course Mr. Genny was ushered into the parlour. From the window Mr. Genny, the farmer, had been seen to look over the hedge at the first field within his range of vision, and to stand with his hands behind him, critically inspecting it.

His first words on entering were—

“ I maun say your grass-land looks well, at any rate.”

“ Weren’t we young farmers brought up at a good school ? ”

“ Ay!—though I say it myself—I think ye were.”

And the old man shook hands with us very heartily, and looked gratified at the compliment which he returned, upon being introduced to my mother, by saying,

“ Pleased to see ye, ma’am. Just such a mootherly, good-looking soul as I expected Mr. Neider’s moother to be. Well, lads,” turning to us, “ and how’s the new farm ? ”

“ Pretty well, thank you ; and how’s the old shop at Follingay ? ” asked Grey.

“ A new place that was too, and cost me a moite of money, and a bit of mortgage, which I was paying off by degrees, when the bank broke.”

"Bank broke!—and you—" I began.

"And I was clean settled, my lads," concluded Genny, "as might have been expected, seeing I put my money there at two-and-a-half per cent., which wasn't covetous, and considering the low rate of interest, might ha' been expected to be safer than it was. And so it be gone, and here I am again—oot on the world!"

Grey and I looked at each other in amazement. I had thought of Mr. Genny being likely to experience loss by the bank breaking, but I had heard nothing from him in reply to a letter that I had written, and the surprise was great to me. And he looked so rosy and bright over his losses, and in his first estate had evinced so much love for the touch o' the siller, that it was some moments before I could recover from my astonishment.

"You didn't answer my note?"

"Aren't I answered it by cooming myself," he said; "where's a better answer than that, now?"

An indisputable fact, although his answer, taken in that sense, was two months old at least.

"I am very sorry—" I began, when he stopped me a second time.

"Ay! and so be I, though I doan't look quite so bad as I did. Not that I fretted," said Genny, with some dignity; "that ain't manlike and English. I think I swore a little, but it didn't do me any good, so I set to work clearing away the rubbish about me, and trying to get at my own proper position, which was a little bit foggy. Well, it ended in my foinding the farm off my hands, my hands free of debt, and myself just owner of three hundred and seventy five poonds, instead of three thoosand odd!"

"Was it necessary to give up the farm?" I asked; "surely with time before you, and with a landlord who, I should think, was far from illiberal, the chances of retrieving your losses were certain?"

"Ay!—but I was getting old, and the farm's luck moight have taken a turn, and I should have had to borrow to begin life upon, and ha' all the harass and trouble of my young days over again. Besides, you see, it's been a shock, and I doan't care about saving and scraping any more—I was getting fast on to a miser, and I think perhaps all this ha' been

for my good. I doan't fancy myself exactly the same man —I ain't down-hearted, not a bit, moind, but I ha' lost a little of my old pluck, and the soight of Follingay puts me out of sorts."

Genny had something on his mind, and we waited patiently for a clear statement.

"So you see, lads, I ha' put my mooney in the Bank of England ; and now I'm looking out for a quiet sort of place, where I can make myself useful, and not be in anybody's way, and arn an honest fifteen shillings or a poond a week. If ye're in want of a man who knows a little of farming, I should loike to be your servant, for auld lang syne's sake —and if ye're full, I'll take a spell somewhere else. That's how it stands."

"It's a large farm, and of course such an overlooker as yourself would be a great assistance to us," said Grey at once ; "but we're young beginners, and can't reward you as your merits——"

"My merits ha' brought me doon to three hundred and seventy-five poonds," interrupted Mr. Genny ; "we needn't cock our ears up much at merits just noo. I've told ye a' th' salary that will do for me, and not be robbing ye while I be hale and hearty. Be it a bargain ? "

"We won't press you quite so hard as that, Mr. Genny," replied I.

"I've had many a good man for lower wages," said Genny ; "and if living hereaboots be not too high, I shall be saving mooney on it ! "

"We'll talk of salary another time," said Grey ; "my partner and I will overhaul the cash account and make that square. By George ! what a farm we shall make of this with three such clever heads to work it."

"Ye take to farming now, Sir," said Genny, turning round on me.

"Did I not take to it in the Welsdon days ? "

"Pretty well, for one who didn't care much for farming, I fancy," said Genny ; "at least Harriet fancied so, and she wor a quick girl to see into the dark corners of one. She told me money was tight-lacing me in, or soomthing of that sort, and we quarrelled aboot it. Ay, but it was true, I fancy now."

“Have you seen Mrs. Genny lately?”

“Yesterday.”

“Indeed! She and her husband are well, I hope?”

“Ay.”

There was a gloominess in his favourite word that chilled me, that even suggested a doubt.

“Isn’t she well?”

“She says so—she ought to be the best judge. It poozles me.”

“What puzzles you?”

He did not appear to admire my cross-questioning; he looked at me very steadily, as if to read on my face the object with which I inquired, and I strove to keep my colour down beneath his keen, grey eyes. I have said I did not love her then, that it was a guilty thought to think of love in connection with her—but I had not lost my interest—and I felt that I never should. To hear that there was a doubt of her health—perhaps her happiness—was to startle me from apathy with an unaccountable force.

“I expect it be her husband that poozles me more than herself, after all,” said he, after a pause; “he was always of the wild-goose sort, and I couldn’t see the end of such a match when it was made, or when it was finished, and you and I were left in the farm aloon. Be we won’t talk of it, Mr. Neider.”

So the subject was dismissed, and some time afterwards Mr. Genny took his departure. He, Grey, and I went over the land together before he left us; and it was like the old times to have him with us, and to hear the broad country accent once again.

Still the old times “with a difference,” for he was never the old master. Positions had changed, and he was the faithful servant, whose energy in our cause, and whose respectful deference to our wishes, were somewhat painful to witness. In a very short time I could see that he was more unhappy concerning his niece than the loss of his money; that, despite my former cross-questioning, remarks concerning her and her husband would at times escape him. And amidst it all I could see that he doubted the niece’s happiness and the nephew’s power to promote it—

and he was a man who, being naturally shrewd, was at least not naturally distrustful.

"I should like to run over with you some night, and see Robin Genny and—your niece," I suggested.

"I think I'd leave it for a while, Sir," said Genny, with a peculiar intonation, that sufficed to check all pressing on the question. And what good could I do—and what right had I to pry into other people's troubles? Was it the foolish idea that I could do some little good? I believe it was, for I was vain enough of my good works.

At this period there came another visitor to the farm—a no less distinguished gentleman than the titled brother of Agatha Thirsk. He shook hands with me in his usual fishy manner, and said, in an aggrieved tone, as though it was a matter of offence, "I've had some difficulty to find you out."

"I was thinking of troubling you with a letter myself, Sir Richard."

"Concerning Mr. Thirsk?" he inquired.

"Concerning Mr. Thirsk's address, which I have been anxious to discover."

"I have found it again."

"Again?"

"He changed his address a second time, and I should have lost sight of him had it not been for a friendly creditor—or rather a creditor whom I have managed to render friendly."

"You have been very kind, I can see, Sir Richard," I remarked.

"I wish to speak with you concerning him," said he, looking askance at Mr. Grey.

"I have no secrets from Mr. Grey, Sir Richard," said I.

"But Sir Richard has many secrets from me," said Grey, rising with his usual good-tempered alacrity; "and if my absence can be of service to you, why, you're very welcome to it."

And Grey beat a retreat.

"Mr. Neider, you have been frank and courteous with one who is almost a stranger to you," said the baronet; "I am beholden to you. I should like an opportunity to testify my respect, Sir."

Usually so calm and matter-of-fact, this observation was a surprise to me.

"Would you object to favour me with the result of that past conference with Mr. Thirsk, which prepared him for his disappointment ? "

I told him, and he listened very attentively to my statement, and shook his head at the conclusion.

"A strange man ! How can I expect to work with these crude and remarkable materials ? How can I look forward to a reconciliation between that man and me ? Mr. Neider, I think in my grave middle age I am becoming a castle-builder."

"It may do you good, Sir Richard ? "

"Why ? "

And he glanced very suspiciously at me through the glasses which he occasionally wore.

"You will pardon me, but I have heard—and you have confessed—that you have been a studious man all your life : absorbed in one particular study, that led you to neglect that greater study of home duties, and home affections, which, sedulously cultivated, might have made your life different."

I spoke out boldly, for I had long attributed Agatha's impulsiveness and wilfulness to his own neglect in the early days when a few kind words might have influenced her for good. I had no cause to spare him, and I thought that the utterance of my opinions on the matter, such as they were, might account to him for his sister's step, which he seemed, in the midst of much anxiety for her welfare, hardly to have forgiven yet.

He sat and reflected on the matter, keeping his eyes upon me all the while.

"We seem to forget our friends in our favourite pursuits. I think we only *seem* sometimes," he added ; "but possibly you are right, and I am wrong. I thank you for speaking plainly to me ; it tells me of an interest in my unfortunate sister, and you may aid me in a wish that I think may prove me"—(he spoke with a little *hauteur* here)—"not entirely heartless."

"You misconstrue my words, Sir Richard."

"No matter. Will you excuse me if I return to the one subject that has brought me here ? "

“Certainly.”

“You are a friend of Mr. Thirsk’s, and he is a man who holds me at arm’s length, and will have none of my peace-offerings. Still, I am not despairing, and of my sister’s sake I will not resign my chance yet; for her boy’s sake, I have no right to let any pride of mine stand between me and the duties to which, at last, I have awakened.”

“You are not keeping to the subject, Sir Richard.”

There was a galvanic twitch to his features, that implied a smile, and he went on again.

“I have faith in you as mediator, Mr. Neider. Judging by your face, I should say that you were an earnest, energetic man, capable of persuading Mr. Thirsk that I am not the evil genius of his life. An earnest, energetic man, at this period of his career, may save Thirsk from much recklessness.”

“Is he reckless?” I inquired.

“I—I don’t know—I have not been told so,” he said, in some confusion; “but I fancy his disappointment is not likely to be met in a proper spirit. All I know is, that he is often from home, and that Agatha leads but a dull life in his absence—and that, that—even now it might all be very different!”

“Sir Richard, I will do my best.”

“Thank you.”

He offered me his fishy hand again, which I shook and returned to him. He seemed to consider it as a kind of agreement between us—almost to regard me as an amiable spy, who might be of service to him in his future plans.

“Mr. Neider, I am a cautious man,” he said, when he and I were standing at the farm-house door; “I take a long while to make a friend—to put my trust in him. You do not feel aggrieved at any reticence in me?”

“No, Sir Richard.”

“Candidly, I keep something back,” he said; “but I am only waiting for a ray of sunshine.”

Sir Richard Freemantle had long to wait.

## CHAPTER II.

## LIVING IN HOPE.

I HAD ascertained from Sir Richard Freemantle that Thirsk rented a small house in the neighbourhood of Marlborough Road, Chelsea. I had only required to know his address, to make one call at least in common sympathy, and I started the next day to play more my own part than the baronet's.

True, the baronet had startled me by his hints, but there was a secret fascination in Nicholas Thirsk himself, for which I could scarcely account. I felt that I should like to render him a service, or be the agent, however unworthy, to his better life. I have said that I was conceited in a former chapter.

I was vain enough to deem myself, to some extent, a judge of character ; and in Thirsk's I had seen, or he had not failed to exhibit, some traits or flashes of a nobler nature than the baronet gave him credit for. In the past estate from which he had suddenly sunk, the nobler nature would have been developed, I fancied ; but in the trials that confronted him, it would have a fight to wage, and he was weak.

The friendship that I felt for William Grey was very different to that which I entertained for Nicholas Thirsk. For Grey I felt as for a dear brother, whose virtues were greater than my own, but whose large heart and steady life required no sympathy of mine, and were above it. In Grey's danger or distress I would have given up every moment of my time and done my best for him, as I am certain he would have done his best for me. But in Thirsk there was evident the need of one true friend—the signs of how the absence of one had set him drifting on his way, tossed here and there by a word, and turned ever from his course. From that course which might have led to better things !—for in contrast to the instability of purpose, where good motives were concerned, was the stern evidence of much cruel persistency in wrong !

Long ago Sir Richard Freemantle, a man who confessed that he judged slowly, had seen the unfitness of Thirsk to be the husband of Agatha—and stung by the opposition, as much as prompted by his love, or tempted by her money, Thirsk had left no stone unturned to win her. And winning her, there seemed the old moral to all hasty matches once again developed.

“I am going to London for a day or two myself,” said Grey, when I mooted the question of calling on Thirsk; “I think we cannot trust the farm into better hands than Genny’s.”

“No,” said I, regarding him suspiciously.

“You looked surprised,” said Grey; “is there anything remarkable in my paying a visit to my father the silversmith, and seeing the few brothers and sisters left me there? In paying my respects to the new baby, etc., etc.”

“No.”

There was nothing surprising in that; but Grey had mentioned his project with a dash and a half stammer, and I was sufficiently acquainted with Grey’s manner to know that there was a little something in the background. However, he kept the secret to himself, and we went to London together—he to Gracechurch Street, and I to an hotel further west, where I intended to stay but a night or two, unless anything more remarkable than I bargained for should transpire in the interim.

I had some difficulty in discovering the residence of Nicholas Thirsk; I had left it till the evening, imagining that it would be his most leisure time—and a dark starless evening amongst the little streets of Chelsea, in search of a certain number of a certain terrace, is an expedition of the Bower of Woodstock character. Still, thanks to a tribe of small boys who formed themselves into a volunteer escort, and bowled muddy hoops at my legs, and threw flip-flaps on all sides of me, I was before the house of Nicholas Thirsk at last.

It was a great fall, and my heart sank at its evidence. He had always spoken of genteel poverty as a curse, and I felt that to him, in the height of his triumph and his plans for the future, such a change as this must have done

harm. A little one-storied house, indifferently clean in its exterior, with the iron railings in the front thereof paintless and rusty. The row of houses of which Thirsk's residence formed a part ended in no thoroughfare ; there was a pair of great wooden gates, which formed by day the back entrance to a factory-yard at one end of the street, and at the other a series of posts, which boys were continually "overing" and falling from.

As I entered the street at seven in the evening with my escort, the place was resonant with boys whooping and yelling in every discordant key, and playing at no particular game that I could distinguish, save rendering each other's habiliments a trifle more ragged than they were. It is needless to say that I was the centre of a curious crowd on the instant.

"He's goin' after Miss Jones," suggested one ; and "No, he ain't, he's come for orders," said another ; and a third, possessed of a second-sight that was remarkable, pronounced that "I wanted the savage cove who cut after them with a whip"—who, I learned afterwards, was the Nicholas Thirsk of whom I was in quest.

A small untidy servant girl answered my appeal ; and to my inquiry "if Mr. Thirsk was at home," grinned from ear to ear in idiotic fashion.

"Is he at home?" I repeated, frowning down this familiarity.

"Lor', no, Sir!—not yet."

"Mrs. Thirsk?" I said, interrogatively.

"Why, Lor', yes, Sir!"

I sent in my card, and she left me standing in the street, with a whole legion of imps becoming more personal every instant.

"Please to come in, Sir," said the maid, returning. I entered, closed the door, as it seemed expected by the servant who had preceded me, and followed her into a room on the same floor at the back of the house. Mrs. Thirsk, with her baby in her arms, rose from a chair by the fire to meet me.

I tried to keep down a start at the wan, pinched face that met my own as I shook hands with her. It was a great contrast to the time when we had met last, when rank and fashion paid her homage, and she was in the midst of a

dazzling world. It was a greater change, because it was so pitiable a face—the face of a weak woman, who had not been able to bear up against it all. Tenderly nurtured, carefully guarded as an exotic that a sharp wind might destroy, this was a rough transplanting.

“I am glad you have come at last,” she said, indicating a chair opposite to her, and sinking into the one she had quitted; “I have been building on your coming.”

“I have had a difficulty in discovering the address, Mrs. Thirsk. Yesterday, I learned it, for the first time, from your brother.”

She gave a startled look round, as if the word “brother” were treason, and might bring ruin on her house. Seeing that I had observed it, she said—

“We don’t speak of my brother here. If—if—Mr. Thirsk should come in presently, pray don’t mention his name, Mr. Neider.”

“Still under ban and interdict, then?”

“For the present—but I have hope. I am living on hope now, Sir.”

It seemed spare diet, on which she had become thin, but I did not tell her so. I hastened to change the subject.

“If you think Mr. Thirsk is not likely to be home yet awhile, I will—”

“Pray don’t go away, Mr. Neider,” she entreated; “if he return, it will—it *may*,” she corrected, “be only for a minute or two if you are not here to meet him. I am sure he will not be late, Sir.”

“May I ask if he has obtained any engagement?”

“Not a settled one yet. But I am hopeful,” she said.

More hope, and speaking of it, too, with a face that grew more bright. Well, something to look forward to in the future, may lighten a present the reverse of satisfactory!

I could but observe how quickly her moods changed, and how one expression chased another upon a varying countenance. She was a weak woman, whom misfortune had shaken. An instant afterwards, and I saw the tears falling silently in the firelight.

“He will be more—more settled when he has obtained a permanent engagement,” she said; “now, of course, he is

hardly himself yet. My poor Nicholas has had a great deal to try him, as you are aware, Mr. Neider."

"I trust the first shock is over?"

"It will be soon; and I think there is a little difference in him this week. He was speaking of you to-day, and envying what he called your German stolidity."

"He gives me credit for more stolidity than I possess, Mrs. Thirsk."

"Once he told me—that was in the old grand days—that you were a man whom to have known earlier would have been of infinite service to him. I wish you were his friend now, and saw him more often. I said as much that night the cruel news was brought to him. I say so now, with all my heart."

"You overrate my influence, Mrs. Thirsk," I said; "the influence to do good and mould his character is here already."

"Oh! my God, I wish it were!"

And the weak woman caught her child to her breast, and gave full vent to her impulsive heart.

"If I could save him by my own life's sacrifice!" she cried, with passionate vehemence; "if I had the power to make him happy, to keep him from wandering about the streets, to bring him to the home wherein I strive my best and do my utmost, and am ever failing! If I ——"

•She checked herself on meeting my wondering gaze, and said, with less excitement—

"But I am a child at heart, Sir, and let these silly thoughts carry me away at times. I was always a child, not over-strong, and perhaps not meant for trouble. Will you forgive my folly, Mr. Neider?"

"My dear Madam, there is nothing to forgive," I said, as she hastily dried her eyes; "this has been a great shock and a great change, and the days are early yet to learn the lesson of content."

"I would have learned it months ago—the next day after our dreams had vanished—if he had not changed so much, and so utterly! Sometimes I almost fancy that he married me for my money—he mourns so for its loss."

"Mourns?"

"I think he must mourn," she said; "he is dark and

grave, and speaks not of the past—that is, he has not spoken until this week, Mr. Neider,” said she, with that sudden brightening of countenance which had already struck me as peculiar; “and this week he is less morbid, and comes home more early. Oh! dear, I hope nothing has happened to him to-night!”

I looked at my watch—it was half-past eight. Certainly not an hour for wives to become alarmed at their husbands’ absence.

“If Mr. Thirsk keep no later hour than this, I should not fancy there were any grave reasons for fear.”

“No—but he promised to be home at six this evening. There is some work waiting for him.”

“Literary?” I inquired.

“Yes. I am certain,” she added, sanguinely, “that it is in his own hands to become a famous writer, after all. But,” with a little sigh, “it is in his own hands to make one or two true friends, and he turns his back upon them. His father he has offended again.”

“Indeed!”

“There was a quarrel between them last week, something about my brother,” she said; “and Nicholas was very hasty—as he always is—and so it ended in the usual manner. I wonder,” with another sigh, “what Nicholas would be without his little boy?”

The little boy had awakened by this time, and was sucking his thumb and looking intently at the fire. A frank-faced, handsome child, of seven or eight months old, with two dark eyes like his father’s.

“Sometimes I think that it is this dear baby of mine,” said she, “that will bring him peace and love. He rails at him in his way, and affects to think little of him and the affection he evinces to him, and calls him a little outcast—and a Bohemian—and other frightful names—but I am sure he loves him. When he grows a big boy, I have such hope!”

For the third time that word, uttered so earnestly and yet affecting her so sensibly, as if its contrast with the present full of shadows touched an acute nerve that made her wince. For ever lying beyond lay the fair hope that was to change all this, and which to think of was to keep her from despairing!

She was talking of her boy, when a dashing summons at the knocker brought the blushes and smiles to her face.

“It is Nicholas!” she cried; and with her baby in her arms she ran from the room to forestall the servant-maid, whom I could hear, in regions below, fighting her way through a crowd of domestic utensils, and kicking a few before her in her haste to reach the stairs. I heard the street door opened also, and a deep voice, very unlike Thirsk’s, say, sharply,

“Why do you come to the door? Haven’t I said fifty times that that drab down stairs is to open the door, Mrs. Thirsk?”

“But—but Nicholas, dear, there is a friend waiting for you.”

“I have no friends!” was the hollow rejoinder.

The door closed, and Nicholas Thirsk, followed by his wife, came into the room. What a dark face it was, before it softened somewhat, as I rose and went towards him!

“What, Neider!” said he, shaking hands with me; “I thought that I had bidden you good-bye for ever.”

“I would not acknowledge it when you insisted, Thirsk.”

“Well, you are a more welcome guest than I expected,” said he; “I thought it was that fool Geuny, when Agatha spoke of ‘a friend.’”

“Is he a frequent visitor here?”

“He comes pottering here sometimes with his stupid plans for new magazines and serials that he hasn’t capital to carry out, or energy to make them succeed if he had. Well, what’s the news?”

He took off his great-coat and flung it across the room, nearly bringing down a candle-lamp on a side-table by the manœuvre.

“Nothing particular.”

“The world has not turned its broad back upon *you*.”

“No—I can’t complain.”

“You’re one of fortune’s favourites, Neider,” said he, taking a third seat immediately fronting the fire; “Blessed is the man who has nothing to complain of! Hollo!”

This last exclamation was occasioned by the child setting up a scream, and making a series of struggles to pass from his mother’s lap to his sire’s.

"Quiet, baby dear, papa is busy," she said, with a wistful look towards Thirsk, as if to read the exact limits of his indulgence that evening.

"The brat should have been in bed, Agatha," he said, sternly; "I suppose you have been nursing him here, after the old silly fashion. I can't be worried!"

But the baby continued to cry, and Thirsk to sit, with a hand on each knee, scowling at the fire.

"Never marry, Neider, without you can support a whole staff of nurse-maids and under-nurses, and keep the off-springs of affection in quarters remote from your own. You will grow grey else, and be an old man, drivelling and idiotic, before your time."

"And the mother?"

"Will degenerate into a fretful, peevish woman, whose love for her children will become a morbidity that fears evil to them out of her sight. Come here, you young imp, then, if it must be. I shan't hear my own voice else."

He took the child in his arms, with more tenderness than his harsh words had seemed to warrant; and the little arms were flung round his neck, the cries of sorrow softened into a few gasping sobs, and were finally replaced by a crow or two of genuine delight.

"You have seen me in one or two characters, Neider," he said—"what do you think of this one?"

"A fair portrait by the fireside of home, and a fair answer to that last charge of yours."

"A humorous caricature, you mean, on social martyrdom."

"No, I don't."

"Then I won't attempt to convince you, for you were always an obstinate brute. Have the proofs come?" he said, turning to his wife.

"They were here at three, dear."

"Think of the pen becoming a means of support to Nicholas Thirsk," he said, turning to me. "I am beginning to discover what brains were given a man for. But it's hard work—cursed up-hill toil, for which the wages are fair perhaps, but the task and the taskmasters severe. And I'm not quite a man of letters yet, and I shall drop the professor before I put in a claim to the name. Now, tell us of the farming. Shop for shop, Neider."

"The young wheat is looking well—that's the principal news. Genny is our over-looker, and that's partly the reason we're likely to make farming pay."

"Farmer Genny?" he said, with some surprise.

"Yes."

"What! has he come to the wall?—the knowing gentleman, who understood so well which side his bread was buttered?"

"He lost his money by the failure of the Tramlingford bank."

Thirsk muttered an oath. He bore the mention of that gigantic swindle better in the early days following its disclosure than he did then. The reality was before him now, and he had tasted of its bitter fruits.

"When I was a boy, I remember a text-hand copy headed, '*Avoid Extravagance*.' I scribbled and blotted at it, and learned no moral therefrom, or even the smash at Tramlingford might not have been quite such an uncomfortable drop. When my debts were paid, I was a beggar, Neider. And if it hadn't been for the charity of one creditor—a hard devil I had always thought him, too—I should have been in Whitecross Street or the Bench. He took a shilling in the pound, like a good Samaritan, and I have remembered him in my prayers ever since."

The boy had fallen asleep over his shoulder by this time, and he transferred him to the care of the mother, who went up stairs with him.

"Well—what do you think of her?" he said, when she had left us together.

"She is looking very ill."

Thirsk's nature was not a sensitive one, and I had no fears of greatly alarming him. Still he moved somewhat restlessly in his chair.

"Oh! she's always like that," he said, carelessly—"next door to a child—excitable and frivolous—to weep at a rash word, or laugh at a jest pointless and insipid. You don't suppose," with a sneer, "that Agatha is any comfort to me in my distress?"

"If you are a comfort to her, Thirsk, it is sufficient."

"I haven't time to talk comfort," said he; "I have to mix in the world now, and keep my eyes open. I want a

companion to help me, not a doll to help. She's happy enough in her way—the horrors make her happy sometimes!—and I didn't expect, when I married her, any great depth of thought, tact, or judgment. I told you what I married her for," he said, almost fiercely.

"You are not going to repeat it again in cold blood?"

"Well, no," he answered, "for she might hear, and that would be a trifle too hard on her, however true it may be. And now, she is thinking of what a sober, comfortable couple we shall be soon, just because I am making the *amende honorable* for a savage fit of last week's!"

He laughed when he met my wondering look.

"I was always a savage at heart, you know, and now poverty brings into grand relief my cannibal propensities. Neider," he said, in a husky whisper, "there is such a thing as being possessed by a devil—and mine's a devil of discontent, that drives me mad at times. What do you think I feed it on?"

"I cannot say."

"Brandy."

"Who recommended you that accursed receipt, Thirsk?"

"No one recommended me," he replied; "I saw what a jolly good-tempered fellow it made of Robin Genny—how he forgot his privations, and the brokers that look him up once a quarter—and went away to a world of his own creating, wherein he had a high opinion of himself and everybody else. I saw him the prince of happy mortals, when I was half smothered with rage and despair."

He seized the poker, and hammered away at the coals in his excitement.

"And brandy does a certain amount of good, if I take enough of it; and Agatha don't bring forth her brother's virtues when I come home," he said.

"You persist in looking at him in a false light, then?" I remarked, taking advantage of the introduction of his name.

"I don't care now whether he is a good or a bad man—in either case I hate him. If it sting him, as Agatha thinks it does, to refuse his offers of assistance,—to keep myself and her in this den, and wound his pride in that way—why, there's a comfort in my poverty, and I'll hug it to my breast,

in preference to moving one step higher by his means. If he ever loved Agatha, and is anxious to see her child, I will sting him all his life!"

He flung the poker into the grate again, where it fell with a noisy clamour, that awoke one of the subjects of his discourse at least.

"I must have something to hate in this new mood of mine," said he; "it's only excitement that sustains me. I don't care a groat what that excitement may consist of, so that it makes me forget. Do you know what kind of work I am writing now?"

"No."

"A smart story, *a la Crebillon fils*. A story that is sure to take, because it appeals to the passions, and hangs a wreath of roses over the doors of dark places, and has a fling at all the creeds under Heaven!"

"Good God, Thirsk!—so bad as that?"

"I gave myself three days' work once, by tearing up, in a fit of moral indignation, two of the best chapters I had ever written. As though the prison for debt was not before me if I flinched—the respectable firm for which I write having advanced money on account."

"Pay it off—let me—"

"Let *me* alone," he interrupted; "men must live, and life's worth nothing if one lament a downfall, or seek not a counter-irritant. That woman's childish love and trust, up stairs, is so much more oil on the flames, knowing what a brute I am. Well for her that ignorance is bliss, and some scraps of her past hero-worship remain still."

"Thirsk, I pray this is but an intermediate state of yours—I believe it is."

"You are a stanch believer," he said, ironically.

"I shall come here more often, to watch the change from bad to better—to offer, in my small way, a little help to bring you to a sense of what is right."

"You know what is right, then?"

"I think so. And, at least, I can tell what is irreparably wrong."

"And you wish me a better man, with all your heart?"

"I do."

"Keep your wishes for one less tormented, then," he

said. "I have passed over the brink, and there is no going back!"

"But there is."

"You don't know half—I shall never tell you half of what a villain I am," he said, letting his hand fall on my shoulder; "in one man's opinion let me be considered to have the germs of a good feeling, and let that man entertain a hope of me."

"You will not seek to avoid him, Thirsk?"

"He will avoid me some day."

His hand was on my shoulder still, and he was still looking in the fire, strange and gloomy and despondent, when Mrs. Thirsk stole in again—and took her place by the side of him whose best days, she thought, were coming still.

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### CHAPTER III.

#### BIRDS OF A FEATHER.

THIRSK was as variable as the wind. He assumed his lightest vein after the appearance of his wife; assumed it so well that had it not been for that wife's previous words—which were still ringing in my ears—I should have been in doubt as to which was true, and which was false and extravagant in his demeanour.

"Bring out the wine, Agatha—shall our friend sit dry-lipped to the banquet? He has a hundred toasts to our future felicity to propose."

Wine was presently forthcoming, together with a small plateful of biscuits, a few of which Thirsk attempted and flung into the fire for being hard and tasting of the cedar-wood lining to the small cellaret wherein they had been deposited.

About ten o'clock I rose to go.

"Sit down, man—sit down," cried Thirsk; "this is an early hour for a bachelor to find his way home."

“You must have work to do, Thirsk.”

“I don’t put pen to paper to-night for fifty thousand publishers,” he said.

“Still it is late—if you will excuse me,” I persisted.

I was in no particular hurry to depart, but I fancied that he would settle down to work after I had gone, or else afford his wife a little of that attention which in the days before marriage had stolen her heart away. I was doomed to be disappointed, however, for he put on his great-coat, and seized his hat.

“You are not going out again, Nicholas?” pleaded his wife.

“My friend is ignorant of the London streets, and might be robbed and murdered, and never a one the wiser—perhaps kidnapped for the sake of his clothes, like an innocent *babby* as he is.”

This jesting did not bring a smile to Agatha’s face.

“I don’t think that I would go out again to-night.”

“I tell you that I am going a little way with Mr. Neider,” he cried, angrily.

Agatha shrank back at his fierce words; she was well versed in his moods, and knew how far she could proceed in safety.

“Shall you be late, dear?”

“It depends upon circumstances—upon the distance to Mr. Neider’s hotel, or the friends he and I may pick up by the way, or even upon the reckless driving of those ‘cussed cabs,’ as Tom Hood called them. Now, Neider.”

“I wish you would leave me to my own resources, Thirsk!”

“You have not any. Come on!”

“Good-night, Mr. Neider. You *will* call more often now, and see him,” she added in a lower tone; “he has been so different to-night.”

So different! This was one of his best moods then, and the young wife’s heart had rejoiced at the change! Thirsk and I went out together, and, until we had passed through the posts at the end of the street, the wife watched us from the open door—an action that again disturbed the little serenity of mind of which my companion had to boast.

“She’s a laughing-stock to her neighbours, and would

make a milksop of me!" said he. "If Sir Richard Freedmantle, Baronet, could read the workings of our hearts, he might exult at the truth of some of his old prophecies."

"I cannot think that he is of an exultant nature."

"You are very fond of defending him," he said, suspiciously; "have you seen him lately?"

"Yes," I said, boldly.

He muttered something, and then turned fiercely on me:—

"He may think that your knowledge of me may help to play his game—don't think so yourself, or we shall quarrel."

"I was not the first to mention his name."

"I have done," said he, passing his arm through mine; "and now, where is your hotel?"

"Near Exeter Hall."

"Pious quarters!—we have a long way to walk."

"I am rather tired, and think of having a Hansom."

"Happy youth, with cash enough in your pockets to indulge in these luxuries!" said he; "pity the sorrows of a poor friend, whose happy days are gone!"

It was the "poor friend," as he termed it, that had suggested the Hansom cab—it would be saving time, and Thirsk would be sooner home again. A shallow expedient on my part, which, I think, he saw through.

When we were near Charing Cross he dashed his fist through the trap in the Hansom, and called out a few words, to which the cabman answered,

"All right, Sir!"

"What plot is hatching now, Thirsk?"

"It's only a whim of mine. You were literary inclined once, you told me—come and see the waifs and strays of the literary world. Not the respectable portion of the community—the house-renters, tax-payers, and great guns—but the hard-worked, nigger-driven third and fourth-raters, the jolly good fellows who spend more money than they earn, and are up to a thing or two."

"Not to-night, Thirsk."

"The virtuous youth sees the broad path before him that leads to destruction," cried Thirsk, "and fancies me Mephistopheles at his elbow! And I take him into society of which any man might be proud."

The cab swung round by the Lyceum theatre, and rattled through a maze of streets near Drury Lane. Presently the cabman was dismissed, and we were entering a spacious supper-room, where several gentlemen were amusing themselves in drinking and smoking, in much the same manner as ordinary mortals.

“A bad night,” said Thirsk, looking round, “only the editor of a penny journal, and a few dramatic scribes, whose company is not worth much, and, yes—Robin Genny, at least, and as bemuddled as usual.”

“Genny !”

“Oh ! he’s always here now ! I fancy he don’t get much work, and has taken to produce a very second-rate article for the money. His brains are spinning rapidly away, and there remains no name to trade on after the brains are gone. He’s turning a visionary, and is full of ideas that are worth nothing. They say he earns money still ; but then there’s an elbow-shaking establishment round the corner which he patronises.”

“I am sorry to hear that.”

“For his sake, or his wife’s ?”

I coloured at the abrupt question, and the strange look in his eyes.

“For both,” I answered ; “do you blame me ?”

“I !” he exclaimed ; “did I ever blame a human being in my life ? Your sentiments do you honour, as prosy people say. Hi, Genny !—leave the Circean cup, and come hither !”

“What the deuce do you know about the Circean cup, young jackanapes ?” cried Genny, advancing with a vacillating step towards us ; “you’re in full feather to-night, Thirsk. How is the world to account for this marvellous good temper ?”

“Am I not always the best of good company ?”

“In your own opinion—nobody else’s.”

“Here’s Alf Neider, who should have been one of our set, and took to farming and farm-stock,” cried Thirsk ; “you don’t mean to say that you are too drunk to know him ?”

“I was never more sober in my life,” said Genny ; and there was a shout of laughter from half a dozen inmates of the room.

"Laugh away, gentlemen—I suppose I may have an opinion of my own on the matter?" said he, "and I'll not quarrel with you on the subject. I never quarrel!"

"A first rate fellow," echoed a voice from a corner; "he's going to stand glasses round in honour of his last success."

"I wouldn't mind that, if I had been in luck's way lately," said he; and then, turning to me, he added, "and you're Neider? Not a bad sort, was he, Thirsk?"

"Would I have brought him here, if he had been? He's —"

"I know all about him," interrupted Genny, "he's one of my best friends. You needn't play the showman to me. My dear Neider, I'm devilish glad to see you!"

And he began to shake my hand with a pertinacity that became rather monotonous. I inquired concerning the health of Mrs. Genny, and was informed that she was the very picture of health, God bless her! and as happy as the day was long; and then the hand-shaking began anew, till, watching my opportunity, I managed to escape his grasp.

"I saw the old farmer a day or two ago, Neider," said he; "he has come down hill as well as the rest of us. What a race it has been to the bottom—and didn't our black-faced friend take it good-humouredly?"

He dug his fingers into Thirsk's side, and was rewarded with a volley of abuse for his pains.

"Genny, you're too drunk to be rational, just at present," concluded Thirsk; "we have arrived too late in the evening, I see!"

"Upon my soul, I am not drunk," said Genny, solemnly, "it's only the excitement of meeting an old friend like Neider. A sweetheart of my wife's once—the sly dog!"

"You needn't blare that story out now," said Thirsk, with more consideration than I could have naturally expected; "we know all about it."

"Thirsk, I have an idea for a new halfpenny magazine."

"Keep your ideas, Genny—I have no time to consider them."

"Let us have a song—and a few dozen oysters, with cayenne vinegar, and three glasses of stout, or brandy and water. Waiter!"

"Excuse me, Genny, but I am paymaster to-night."

"Of course you are—who denies it?" said Genny, at which there was a general laugh at my expense.

"My treating days are over," said he, in a lachrymose vein; "somehow or other things ain't quite so square as they used to be. When I had a shilling to spend, I shared it with my co-mates and brothers in ink, and it's infernally seldom that they imitate so fair an example. Let us have supper. I promised Harriet to be at home—at home at—what the devil time now did I promise Harriet to be at home?"

All this is a pitiable picture, which I am anxious to curtail—which I would not have introduced here, had it not led to other events. It was painful to see how terribly he had altered, or having seen him under different auspices, feel how much he had disguised. It was the wreck of a clever man, always as sad a ruin as human life can exhibit. A man with half his talent, and twice his perseverance, might have risen higher in the scale. I do not set him here as a fair type of a literary man; to a hundred who are hard-working and earnest, there is one like unto him perhaps. A man whose excuse for much weakness is reaction and desire of change, and who will let the best chances of life go by and make no effort. One who made money quickly, and was infected with a disease not wholly uncommon to literary men—that of spending it more rapidly, without a thought for the morrow, or a dream of a day when the hand, the sight, or the brain might fail him. Summed up in a few words, a man who had not a will of his own. There are such men in all professions, and they are ever to be found late in life at the bottom of the hill.

I pass over the supper, the company that increased as the hours grew late, and the talk of books, plays and actresses that followed. They were all third-rate professionals of literature and the stage, and envious of those who succeeded in the world better than themselves.

Throughout the evening I did not hear one good word spoken of those whose names were famous; they talked a great deal of the merits of present company, and of the vices of all the leading men and women of the time, and I felt that they were no true representatives even of that literary

world for which they had not even one good word. It was a mixture of poor reporters, writers of bad farces, contributors to the lowest class magazines, supernumeraries of West-end theatres who were "kept down" by cruel managers and spiteful first comedians. From this world I was glad to be quit, and find myself in the cool streets again. Genny and Thirsk were with me—Thirsk irritable and moody, as though society had soured him ; Genny more good-tempered and easy than ever, but so unsteady on his legs that he slipped as he emerged from the supper-room, and clung to my arm tenaciously.

"They should have a new step here," said Genny ; "that's the second time I've stumbled this week."

"Good-night to you," said Thirsk.

"I shall give you a look in next week, Thirsk," said he ; "I've another idea for a sixpenny journal, that I think we might push into the market between us."

"Good-night," returned Thirsk ; "are you coming, Neider ?"

"Coming !" echoed Genny ; "no, Sir, he's coming with me, to pay his respects to Mrs. Genny, and enjoy an after supper pipe by the fireside. Do you think I am always from home, like you ?"

"Oh ! you are the model husband," sneered Thirsk ; "now Neider, which way is it to be ?"

"I think it is too late to call on Mrs. Genny to-night."

"She always sits up for me—it's all right."

But I declined his offer, and, after bidding him good-night, Thirsk and I left him to proceed on his way alone. At the corner of the street we stopped to look after him. He was plodding on unsteadily, and as we watched he gave a sudden lurch that took him into the roadway, where he continued to walk unconsciously.

"He's abominably drunk," commented Thirsk ; "if he's not run over presently, it's no fault of his own."

"Does he live far from here ?"

"Somewhere in Gray's Inn Road—down a back slum that corresponds with my locality."

"I think I'll see him as far as his own door."

"Ah !—ha !"

“ What do you mean by that, Thirsk ? ”

“ Nothing—nothing,” he said. “ I am a scoffer, and see no good in my own species. I come of a bad stock, and there’s evil ingrained in me. You’ll be doing a good turn to Robin Genny—good-night.”

“ Good-night, Thirsk—I shall see you shortly.”

“ I hope so.”

He walked on in the direction of home, and I followed Robin Genny. I had a fear that he would meet with an accident before his return home, and I went after him, as I would have gone after Nicholas Thirsk had he needed my services. And yet amidst my best intentions there lurked the selfish wish to see Harriet Genny once more. I could but wonder how she bore her troubles, and if there were as many shadows in her home as in the house at Chelsea I had quitted that night.

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## CHAPTER IV

### BONDAGE.

I HAD soon overtaken Robin Genny, and drawn him from the roadway to the narrow pavement. When I first touched his arm, he muttered without turning round,

“ All right—at whose suit ? ”

“ Alfred Neider’s, Esquire, late of Follingay farm.”

He looked up and laughed.

“ I thought it was all—all up with me,” said he ; “ they’ve been threatening so long, that it came quite natural. So you’ve repented ? ”

“ Partly,” was the reply ; “ I am going your way, if you’ll allow me.”

“ By all means ! —I was always fond of company.”

He plodded on in silence for some time. Suddenly he exclaimed :—

“ How Harriet will stare to see you ! ”

“I—I am not quite certain that I shall look in to-night.”

“Nonsense, my dear fellow—you’re one of the old stock. Harriet don’t,” with a feeble laugh, “take very much to the new. She talks sometimes of their leading me away, as if I were ever talked over, or *done in my life!*”

“You are at home a great deal, of course?”

“Every moment I have to spare, my dear Neider,” said he, with a hiccup; “for she’s a girl who makes home very comfortable and jolly. And she don’t preach to me—I hate preaching. And when I’m ill she makes a capital nurse!”

“Ill!”

“I have swimmings in my head, and all manner of funny complaints—I can’t think what causes them.”

“You don’t drink much, I suppose?” I suggested; “that’s a bad habit, which brings on a train of disasters.”

“Oh, no! I never drink,” said he; “I can’t write if I drink. Which is the Gray’s Inn Road, now?”

“I think this is it. Shall I ask?”

“I’ve no objection, though it seems rather foolish for me not to know the Gray’s Inn Ro-o-ad. Steady, Neider, you have a horribly ungraceful walk of your own!”

I did not argue the matter with him as to whose walk might be considered the more ungraceful of the two—he was past argument. I inquired for the Gray’s Inn Road, and found we were progressing correctly. Indeed, with a true drunkard’s instinct, he led the way direct to his home—more dark and dull a home, standing in a more neglected street than I had found his brother author’s dwelling-place.

It was striking two, from some neighbouring church-clock, when the door opened to our summons.

“Don’t be alarmed, my dear, it’s not one of the new set. It’s Alfred Neider, of—of ours.”

“Come in!—come in! There is no occasion to talk so loud at this hour,” I heard Harriet’s voice exclaim; “the lodgers will hear you, and complain in the morning, Robin.”

“I forgot the lodgers!”

She led the way into the front room—a sparingly furnished

room, lighted by one glimmering candle. There were two female occupants of the room then—Harriet Genny, and her cousin Mercy Ricksworth ; the former with a shawl huddled over her shoulders for warmth, the latter dressed for walking. I scarcely remembered shaking hands with both of them a moment afterwards, so amazed was I at the change that a few months had made in Harriet Genny.

Was it Harriet Genny, or her ghost, no more real and substantial than her shadow thrown upon the wall by the flickering candle-light ?

Those hollow eyes, that wan face, the high cheek-bones, were all new to me ; and could the smile with which she welcomed Robin Genny back have so long masked the care at her heart, as to deceive even him ?

“ You have been ill, Mrs. Genny ! ” I ejaculated.

“ I am quite well. I haven’t time for any fine ailments,” she replied ; “ pray sit down, Mr. Neider. You are a late guest, but a welcome one.”

“ I am glad to hear that you are quite well,” I could but respond ; then I leaned back in the chair, somewhat stupefied.

“ Now, Harriet, dear—what can we give Mr. Neider, in the shape of something more substantial than words ? Mercy, do you mind running round—”

“ I shall not stop a minute, Genny,” I said, quickly. “ I have only to bid you good-night, and hope that you will allow me to call to-morrow, or next day, at an hour more seasonable.”

“ Can’t we knock him up a bed somewhere, Harriet ? ”

“ I fear not,” was the dry response.

“ Oh ! I forgot those confounded lodgers ! ” said Genny ; “ don’t you think old Mason next door might manage to shake him down somewhere ? ”

“ My bed is already engaged at an hotel, Genny,” I remarked.

“ Will you come up stairs with me for a moment, Robin ? ” said his wife.

“ What for ? ”

“ I have something to tell you—will you come ? ”

“ Not just yet, my dear.”

But Harriet put her hand upon his arm, and said some-

thing in a lower tone—in such a tone as a mother would address a froward child—and Genny followed her from the room.

Mercy Ricksworth turned to me almost before the door had closed :—

“ He has met Mr. Thirsk again ? ” she cried.

“ Mr. Thirsk was not with him till a late hour, Miss Ricksworth.”

“ And he was—he was like that then ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ Poor Robin !—ever his own enemy ! He should have been my father’s son ! ” she added bitterly.

“ May I ask if you are staying in London ? ” I inquired, making an effort to dismiss a painful topic.

“ My mother keeps a little shop in this neighbourhood. Since I have left the Thirisks’, I assist her as well as I can.”

“ We all have given up Welsdon in the Woods, then ? ”

“ Yes,” she said ; “ we were all ambitious, and tired of a country life. How we have changed ! ”

“ Change is natural to us, I suppose.”

“ But they have been unnatural changes,” she cried, impetuously ; “ the result of unnatural marriages. And I was a fool, who helped her I loved—I worshipped—to her misery ! ”

“ Misery is a hard term.”

“ It is a—” she stopped, as Harriet came back into the room, and looked almost sternly from me to her.

“ On whose misery are you commenting—you two ? ”

“ We were speaking of Mr. Thirsk and his wife, Mrs. Genny.”

“ Have you seen them lately ? ”

“ To-night.”

“ They occupy their relative positions, I presume—the selfish man, the poor weak woman, whom a word can sway.”

“ She is weak, and he is reckless and excitable, at least.”

“ An unhappy, ill-assorted match,” she said, as though her own marriage had been the best in the world ; “ what else could have been hoped from it ? ”

“ I hoped much more ! ” cried Mercy, almost indignantly.

"You were a foolish, romantic girl, and as impulsive as your mistress."

"Please don't say anything against her," cried Mercy, with still more vehemence; "if you will not help her as I wish, don't slander her."

"Mercy?"

"Forgive me, Harriet, but I am hasty—I was always hasty. And you know how much I love her! I have been with her all my life, off and on, even from the time when we were little children together, and I cannot bear to hear a word against her. Wouldn't I die to serve her?—*you know!*"

"You will never serve her if you are always flashing up like this, Mercy."

"I will try."

Harriet did not reply to the sullen response; she understood Mercy, and Mercy's love for Mrs. Thirsk, and said no more. I was standing at the parlour door, looking at them both—both so poorly clad, both such mistaken women! I had been shocked by the evidence of poverty, by the struggle against adverse circumstances, which everything before me indicated. And she was strong amidst it all—I saw it still—I knew it. God be thanked, she did not resemble Agatha Thirsk!

"It is too late, Mr. Neider, for us to seek to detain you—you will excuse my husband coming down again, I am sure."

I was very glad to excuse him, though I simply agreed with her that the hour was late.

"He has fallen amongst a few convivial friends to-night," she said with a faint smile, "and he will have to work with two-fold energy to-morrow, to make up for the time he has lost. Where did you meet him?"

I told her.

"Ah!—he *is* there once or twice a year. Of course, I cannot expect him always at home. You, Mr. Neider, must not judge him by so exceptional a night as this. He is very—steady—generally!"

The words came slowly forth. Poor, vain, white lies, which were an effort to make, and deceived no one.

"If we are not quite so well off as we might be," said she,

as though she had previously remarked my wandering glance round the poorly-furnished room, "we may rise in life at any moment—Robin being clever and industrious. One lucky hit in his profession, Mr. Neider, is a rise to greatness on the instant."

"Yes—possibly."

"And he is a sanguine man. We are both a little too sanguine, perhaps, but it is a good trait of character, though it has led us to launch out a little beyond our means—and the means has not come yet. Still, if he makes me the best, the kindest, the most considerate of husbands, this little home is happy enough for me."

She spoke warmly, almost defiantly, and I could but assent to all she said. If I saw that it was acting, and but poor acting, it was not my place to say I doubted everything, and believed in nothing but her own hard fate. Standing ever a screen to her husband's faults, and taking a share of them undeservedly, my heart sank, yet thrilled, at her heroism. She was the true wife that I knew she would be. His weakness would not steal away her love, but be part of her own—to be ever fought against and extenuated, from the day their lives were linked together. She might wake to the knowledge of having deceived herself in hoping too much from the future, but she would accuse but herself for the grave mistake that had marred it.

"You spoke of coming to-morrow, Mr. Neider," said she ; "it may seem ungracious, but I have to ask you to defer your visit."

"Mrs. Genny has only to ask."

"He *must* work to-morrow, and every minute stolen from his time distracts his mind from the task upon which he is engaged. You see this, Mr. Neider."

"Perfectly," I answered. "I must take my chance on a future day of finding him less busy. Unless Mr. Genny and you will forestall me by a visit to my new farm."

"We never pay visits."

"But I am an old friend, and I think the change would be beneficial to you both."

"No," she said, in her old abrupt manner—the first sign of the old petulance that she had yet exhibited.

"It is late, Mrs. Genny, and we will not argue the matter

present. It is not the last time that I shall make Mr. Genny and you the offer."

"You are very kind," she murmured; "but it is impossible for us to think of it. Are you going now?"

"Have I not already detained you too long?"

"Late hours agree with me very well," said she. "Mercy, dear," to her cousin, "I think you had better stay to-night—it is very late."

"No, thank you," was the firm response.

"Then I shall place you under Mr. Neider's escort. It is too late for a young woman to be alone in the streets, however short the distance may be to her home. And I am sure Mr. Neider will oblige us both so far."

"I shall be very happy."

Mercy's dark eyes seemed full of an uncomplimentary rejoinder. I should not have been surprised at her flat refusal to allow me to accompany her one step of the way. She said nothing, however, but followed Harriet and me into the passage. Harriet opened the door, and said "Good-night, Mercy," offering to kiss her; Mercy drew back. There had evidently been a little quarrel previous to my arrival.

"Very well," said Harriet, in a low tone; "if you will take offence because I have no heart to obey your foolish wishes you must."

"You could do much—and you won't!"

"Let me change places with her for a moment—would you have pressed her to see me?"

"Yes," was the quick answer.

"I can do no good—I have my own duties to fulfil."

"She is weak—she has been brought up differently to you, and I—I know not what is best myself."

"What is it you want?"

"I wish you to talk with her—you can! She frets and does not bear up well, and you—you are a woman of courage!"

"Would not you take me for an Amazon, Mr. Neider, or, at least, a person of very great importance, to hear my cousin speak like this?"

"Pardon me intruding on your particular topic of conversation, but I think you allude to Mrs. Thirsk?" I said.

“Yes,” answered Mercy, eagerly.

“Miss Mercy is in the right, then; you could be of service to Mrs. Thirsk.”

“She is in trouble,” murmured Mercy.

“Haven’t I my own—duties?” she added, after a pause; “have I been so much Mrs. Thirsk’s friend, that I can be warranted in intruding upon her?”

“You would both be the better for it, for you are both—” began Mercy.

“Go, now, Mercy—please go! I am tired of your persistence—I succumb to it. I will call and see her.”

Mercy flung her arms round her, and kissed her on the instant; after which impetuous salutation, I shook hands with Mrs. Genny. What a feverish hand it was to hold a minute in my own!

“Will you forgive me saying that a sanguine nature—such as yours and your husband’s—is liable to much disappointment; that I hope—that in any little temporary check which may embarrass you—you will both think of me as an old friend?”

At the sight of her home and her appearance therein, I had made up my mind to say something to that effect. I had seen too surely the signs of a desperate fight, to shrink from saying it. In as indirect a manner I implied as much, and chanced offending her.

The light she held in her hand betrayed the varying colour on her cheek—albeit without it, the voice, cold, icy and repelling, would have deceived me.

“In my husband’s name, I thank you for your interest in us, though I hope he and I will ever be able to assist ourselves. Good-night, Sir.”

“Good-night.”

And so we parted, and the firm woman shut the door between us, somewhat suddenly. I did not hear her go back to her room—I fancied even that I heard a wild, stifled sob; but I was full of fancies that night!

“I think she is jealous of my love for Agatha,” said Mercy to me, when we were in the street; “as if I could help loving Agatha Thirsk better than herself! Agatha, who has been always kind to me, and always forgotten the distance between us!”

“ You love your cousin too ? ”

“ Ever since that night you and she came to my father’s cottage, I have understood her better,” said Mercy; “ I believe that I am the only one who understands her in the world. All her life has been passed in hiding her true feelings, and calling it—duty ! Too much duty in her, and too little in my dear mistress, have brought about the same result. Oh ! it drives me mad to think what fools they both have been ! ”

And the girl stamped her foot upon the pavement.

“ I can see it all now,” she cried; “ and now it is too late ! They should have been men’s wives ! ”

“ And are they not,—true and loving ones ? ”

“ You can see, as well as I, what they are. One shows by a word, and the other, by an over-effort to appear her usual self, betrays it also. I saw you had read them both, Sir.”

“ Still, they are good wives ? ” I persisted.

“ They are good slaves ! ”

We walked on in silence several streets’-length. Coming from the house, I had offered her my arm, and she had declined it, but we remained side by side, and, indeed, I had some difficulty to keep up with her.

Silently and rapidly we went from street to street, I thinking of her excited words, and all that they implied. They had but confirmed my own suspicions ; but I would have preferred them all my life mere doubts, and not have let this girl’s assertion strengthen them into the certainties that there was no disputing. She spoke with an honest indignation that aroused my own—she must have been a witness to every step in the career of both mistaken wives.

And she was right—they were more slaves than wives. Hoping for the brighter days when the chain should gall less, the task be less hard, or the strength greater to bear. Slaves who looked at life differently, and went differently to work ; who were both unsuccessful, and both toiling on still ;—one fretful, wayward, and childish, the other still firm, and keeping back, in her fortitude, trials known but to herself and her God.

There are all degrees of slavery ; but the slavery that binds, from life unto death, the true to the false, and lets the

false conquer—the firm to the weak, and yet gives to the weak no power to grow strong—is the worst and the harshest of bondage.

Slaves to the false ideas that led there steps awry—slaves of the ring !



## CHAPTER V.

### TWO MORE OLD FACES.

“I NEED not trouble you further,” said Mercy, breaking the long silence.

“Do you live near here ?”

“Somewhat near,” she said, in a hesitating manner ; “but here is my father, to relieve you of the charge that was thrust on you.”

“Not unwillingly, Miss Mercy, and not even thrust.”

“Oh ! I am not particular what word I choose,” said she ; “I will wish you good-night here.”

She seemed anxious to be gone before her father came up ; but Peter Ricksworth’s long legs were too quick for her, and that grimy gentleman was soon in the flesh before me.

“What ! another sweetheart, girl !” he exclaimed ; “and yet—why, it’s you, is it ? It’s very funny how I keep tumbling over *you* now.”

He was sober for once, but none the more ingratiating for that. In his sober moods he was but a scowling, villainous-looking mortal, in whose company no man in his senses would care to remain long.

“Mr. Neider was kind enough to see me a little way home from Robin’s, where I met him,” explained Mercy.

“Right, my dear—I don’t say anything agin’ Mr. Neider—surely, if I doan’t trust you, who have I to trust ? And if I wor cross with you, who have I to care about and think anything of ?”

And he drew her hand through his arm, with that strange tenderness toward her which had been always characteristic

of his manner. It was like the affection of a wolf-dog for one that has been kind to it—but it told of better days, or a better nature in Peter Ricksworth.

“ You’re looking well-fleshed, Mr. Neider,” said he, roughly ; “ it’s astonishing what a difference fine feathers make in one.”

“ Father,” whispered Mercy, “ he’s been very kind in seeing me so far on a way that you promised to meet me.”

“ I doan’t mean any offence,” replied he ; “ I aren’t riled you, Sir ? ” he inquired, apologetically.

“ Not at all.”

“ I was allus rough in my way, you see, and it allus gangrenes me a little to see swells about. I’ve got a kind of fancy, too, that they want to make off with my Mercy—for the only little bit of good that’s left in me, she keeps there. I saw an old sweetheart of yours hanging about the house to-night, Mercy. He thought I hadn’t got my eye on him.”

“ Whom do you mean ? ” cried Mercy.

“ That Mr. Grey, who used to—you know ? ”

“ You must have been dreaming, father.”

“ Devil a bit ! ”

“ Or he must have been passing by chance. Don’t you think he has forgotten all his old folly by this time ? ”

She said it in a loud tone, as though the question were put to me also ; but I could not reply to it, and was as surprised as herself at Mr. Ricksworth’s news. Grey had said so little of his romance of late months, and seemed, by his peace of mind and genial spirits, to have so utterly outlived it, that this sign of the past fascination took away my breath.

I glanced at Mercy. In her poor neat dress and plain cottage bonnet she still looked so beautiful, that I could excuse William Grey his passion. I even wondered at that moment if she would have made so bad a wife for William Grey, had she married him for love. She had evinced that night much of shrewdness, forethought, and natural kindness of disposition. And his was so faithful a nature, and he would have been so different a husband from *others* that I knew.

“ It’s precious cold shivering here with the ghost of nothing

warm inside a feller," said Ricksworth, buttoning his coat over his attenuated frame—I was surprised to see how thin he had become—"and what's more, there's nothing to be got by staying. Bid the gentleman good-night, Mercy."

She bade me good-night. I extended my hand, but she did not appear to see it; and old Ricksworth, with a vague idea that it might contain a *douceur*, took it instead, and returned it after a feeble shake.

"It is odd how you and I keep running agin' each other, isn't it?"

"A little singular."

"I allus found that people who run agin' me too much, allus turned out my blackest persinel inimies—you'll be one of 'em too."

"No, I think not."

"I'm not so sure on it."

And, studying the question intently, Mr. Ricksworth took his departure, with Mercy on his arm.

I had not turned away, when I felt my own arm touched. All the faces of the past seemed destined to meet my own that night, although this one, famine-pinched and haggard, took me some time to recollect.

"Ipps," I said, at last.

"Ipps it be, Sir—I thought you'd know me."

"Have you been with Ricksworth?"

"It doan't matter what company I keep now," said he, evasively; "it wor all through going on and deceiving the old measter."

"What are you doing?"

"Begging for a living—stealing for one when begging woan't answer—I wor always sharp for an old man."

"A sad confession, Ipps."

"All along o' Thirsk; he did it by leading an ould ignorant man into temptation," said he; "if it hadn't been along o' him!"

"Why don't you return to Welsdon in the Woods?"

"Welsdon workus?"

"Even that would be better than your present life."

"I'll never go into a workus," he cried. "I'd rather die out here in the streets, and that's what it'll come to, moind you."

"Have you anything more to say to me?"

"Only to ax you for an odd sixpence, for the sake of ould times. Upon my soul, I'm starving!"

And he looked it. I gave him the sixpence that he begged for, and he thanked me with something of the true professional whine, as I stepped out briskly towards my hotel.

I did not think of meeting him again, under strange circumstances, in the days that were ahead of me.



## CHAPTER VI.

TO AND FRO.

In my wish to do a little good, I had forgotten what harm might fall upon myself. In my concern for others, I paid no heed to signs and symptoms that might warn me of a folly. On my way blindly, with false confidence in the purity of all my motives, and, God knows, dreaming not of evil, I proceeded.

The picture of Harriet Genny's home, and Harriet Genny's changed looks, were photographed upon my brain, and had become part of myself. I could believe in a long life's study to hide the truth from the prying eyes of curious society—to live on even away from herself, and all those thoughts she kept for ever down, and would not face. For Robin Genny, a drunkard, a gamester, and a spendthrift, had her life been sacrificed—and he, a coward, with no moral courage to resist, let her struggle on in hope of him, and made no effort to grow strong. The last friend or enemy, and the last word to sway him from his best intentions, and sink him deeper every day!

That he would ever change, or be, for one day, a better, wiser man, I could not believe; and yet I would have given him my last penny had he needed it, for the heroic wife to whose true virtues he was blind.

I believe that this particular period of my career was the most unsettled and miserable of all—I was unhappy for no cause that I could account, save that I made Harriet Genny's troubles my own, and brooded over them, and yet awoke not to the consciousness of truth.

My mother was anxious about me—my partner, Grey, looked at me dubiously—old Genny met me in the fields, and asked if I were well—people turned and gazed after me in the street. The farm life had become again an employment utterly distasteful; when I was at home I worked at it, and feigned an interest, for my partner's sake, but in my heart I cursed it, and all the commonplaces that belonged to it.

Can it be believed, even at that time, that I was anxious about Grey, whose danger was much less than mine; or that, in the first week we met again, I spoke of meeting Ricksworth, and the comments he had made on discovering Grey's propinquity to his establishment? I was very sure that the whole world was going wrong, and succumbing to temptation, save myself. I would have played Mentor in my egotism to the wisest head, and have gone dashing on myself, a blind Telemachus.

“Grey, you have not forgotten Mercy Ricksworth?”

“Have I ever professed forgetfulness?”

“You went to London to see her—don't deny it!”

“My dear fellow, I am not going!”

“Is not this fluttering round the flame that may irreparably singe your wings again?”

“I have been only anxious to make sure that she was well,” said he, calmly; “and that in the midst of the troubles which have fallen on most of our little circle, she and those who bear her name had not encountered trials too heavy to sustain.”

“And what did you discover?”

“That they are no better or worse off than in the country days—that she bears up with the same spirit, trying to do her best for all, and sacrificing much for that infernal scamp of a father.”

“I met him quite steady and sober.”

“I think his wife keeps a sharp look-out after the money that she earns by needlework; but I heard in the neighbourhood all that was bad of him. I would have given fifty pounds

to have heard a good report, for Mercy Ricksworth's sake."

"Would you marry her, now that you have arrived at years of discretion, and all the romance of a first love has had time to be analysed?"

"She's a brave girl! Yes!"

"Pronounced incurable, Grey!"

I laughed a little at his folly, and, with a greater folly hidden from him, I went back to London. I had always an excuse to stay in London a few days in each week now, which excuse was accepted as a matter of course by Grey, and considered a change that would do me good by my easy mother.

I made Thirsk my friend; I sought his society; I fancied that my own would be of service to him, and keep him closer to his home. And I was rewarded by Agatha's thanks, a difference at times in her husband's dark moods, and by a certain influence that I exercised occasionally over him—finally, by meeting at Thirsk's house Robin Genny's wife.

There was seldom much conversation between Harriet and me, but it was pleasant to see her now and then, and to sit and watch her talking to the young wife, whose will was almost as weak as Robin Genny's; to watch the animated play of her features, and the interest that was awakened thereon, now and then, by Agatha's enthusiasm, or Agatha's despair.

There were times more often when, in my frequent visits to the house at Chelsea, I found Thirsk absent, and yet sat down a welcome guest there; talked of departure and yet lingered, and did my best to add a little lightness to the thoughts of two anxious women. There were times when Harriet was absent also, and I departed, after a few minutes' conversation, and found myself wandering towards Robin Genny's house, and pausing at the corner of the street and turning back again, too timid to intrude upon her home with anything that might seem as an excuse to her.

To and fro, to and fro, burnt up with inward fever, keeping back all thoughts that might have told me whither I was drifting, and playing ever the Samaritan. Frequenting strange haunts in search of Robin Genny, and more than once the means of bringing him to his home, and

more than once attempting to preach to a mind as unstable as water the advantages of perseverance. I did all this for Harriet Genny's sake—I owned that, at least, to my heart. I had seen she was a suffering woman, who deserved a happier fate; if I could have brought a reformed husband to her side, her life would have been bright enough. But I had outlived all love for her; she was a wife, and beyond me; I only wished to see her happy! No thought of any kind to startle me would I indulge in, or give ear to. Ever to and fro upon the restless sea, absorbed in my strange visionary mission, that could not end in good, for there was evil in its midst. A sleeping evil, that might wake at any time and bring a madness on me, so infatuated with my efforts had I grown.

To and fro, and still unwarned, even when by accident a late visit of Harriet to Mrs. Thirsk's compelled me to offer her my escort home. It was a long walk through crowded thoroughfares, and she had trust in me; it was a walk that reminded me of past days, and set my brain whirling with the past wild thoughts, that in common justice I should have outlived.

We spoke of Agatha Thirsk and her husband, of what an ill-assorted couple they were, and how the father's love for his child was the only sign of true affection.

“He will change—I believe he will change.”

“His is a hard mind, and she is a weak woman, whom he must naturally despise,” said Harriet; “even her love for him is a weakness. In her love, and in her hope to benefit him, she deceives him.”

“I do not understand you.”

“This evening when I called, Sir Richard Freemantle was there.”

“Sir Richard Freemantle!” I exclaimed.

“Yes; he visits his sister in Thirsk's absence, and is planning, I believe, something for Thirsk's benefit; but it is no more nor less than deceit.”

“I think you are right, but still, strange methods are necessary with strange natures; and if Thirsk is to rise in life again, I believe it must be by the means of that brother-in-law to whom his antipathy is so great.”

“Why not explain all to Mr. Thirsk?”

"I see you do not know Mr. Thirsk perfectly."

"I have cause to know him," she said.

She was thinking of her husband, and how Thirsk had led him astray, and might still be leading him, for what she knew of the matter. I knew it by that weary sigh which can only escape the lips of a disappointed woman. She reverted to Sir Richard Freemantle with abruptness ; spoke of his eccentricities, his desire to make friends with Thirsk, of his growing and passionate affection for his sister's child.

"If he do good, perhaps this little secrecy between brother and sister may be excused," said Harriet ; "you may be right, Mr. Neider—you who profess to know so much more of the wild nature of your friend. I may be deceived in him ; I am not so vain of my own judgment as I used to be."

Somehow we drifted back to the old days at Follingay farm, to the three farm pupils there, and the honest farmer whose ship had sunk with the great commercial fraud that had wrecked so many fortunes. Dear old times to me, but dangerous, for I was younger then and more enthusiastic, and there was allied with them much of the one romance that I had long concealed, and the reminiscences of which thrilled me with a wondrous force.

"And you are finally a farmer, Mr. Neider ? "

"Yes, for ever and aye a farmer."

"I have often thought that I offered you very bad advice, in recommending the literary profession—in urging you to follow the bent of your wishes, and seek a world wherein there is much jealousy and temptation. You are happy and content now, and the world of books, I think, is ever a restless one."

"Not happy and content, Mrs. Genny. I have been, all my life, a dissatisfied man."

She looked at me with two great startled eyes, and I felt the blood rushing to my face, a guilty witness of how long I had thought of her. All the rest of the way home she was strangely silent. I felt that her hand rested more lightly on my arm, as if a suspicion had been aroused, or she had now less faith in me. She bade me good-night coldly at the corner of her street, and I went home bewildered and storm-driven,

And yet I could not think. I was a coward, who feared to think at last. Nearer and nearer the grim awful truth advanced, and I sat and confronted it, and would not see it.

She was a brave woman, who saw it also, and confuted me. The end was at hand, and I still dreaming, when the shock was given.

I had met her at Thirsk's house again—the hour was once more late, and we had left the house together.

"I shall not take you out of your way to-night, Mr. Neider," she said, in a very different tone to that which she had heretofore adopted; "our roads lie apart too much."

"But the hour is late."

"I have no fear of anyone harming me," said Harriet Genny, proudly.

"Mrs. Genny," said I, rashly, "I shall accompany you."

"Shall!" she echoed.

"Pardon me; but I spoke hastily, and did not think."

"Do you ever think?" she asked.

I shrunk from the steady searching light in her hazel eyes. For a moment I was at a loss for a reply, and she continued:

"You are a young man, neglecting the best chances of life," said she; "you are blind to those opportunities that should make a man of you. You can be doing no good by coming here so often, and you may bring about, unconsciously, much harm. I should like to shake hands, now, Mr. Neider, and say good-bye for ever."

"God forbid!" I cried. "I feel you are unhappy, and that I might befriend you."

"You will never be a friend of mine," she said firmly.

"Those are cruel words, Mrs. Genny. They dash down every hope—they——"

"Stay, Sir!" she interrupted. "Think of your own rash words, and to whom you address them. Think of your charge, that I am an unhappy woman—if false, how shameful of you; and if true, how wrong of you to say as much to me! There, Sir, go your way," she added. "I shall not call here again. I have done no good here; I possess no charm to win back to Mrs. Thirsk the attentions of a man who loved her for her money. You are an honest man now, with a mother to love and a wife to seek, and I am a poor

woman, who does not wish you, and who would not trust you, for a friend. You are as weak and cowardly as all the rest!"

"Will you tell me what to do?"

"Never seek me, or those belonging to me, out again."

And with this adjuration, awfully stern, and delivered with vehemence, she darted away from me, and left me standing in the dark streets.

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## CHAPTER VII.

### CAPTIVITY.

THE indignant outburst of a true woman had brought me to myself. From that which I had feared to set before myself she had torn away the mask. From her I might have expected it; she had had ever a will that flinched not from stern truths, when a truth, however stern, could strike at an evil; I felt that I was lowered in her eyes; that my sickly sentimentalism had degraded me, and that all past efforts in her eyes must now seem tinged with a falseness and baseness that would render my name ever a shame to her.

I went home that night, and reached the farm at a late hour. I could not stay longer in London, isolated from all who still respected me. All the dangers to which I had closed my eyes were haunting me at last, and I thanked God for my escape.

The storm over, and the shame self-acknowledged, I turned to my work, I believe a more humble and better man. My eyes were opened to the duties I had neglected, as well as to the sunken rocks over which I had passed in safety, and by a hairbreadth. The feverish uncertainty of every step, the disregard of where the next might take me, the deep brooding on the unalterable, were all gone, and I began a new life, with a new energy that surprised my partner in farming.

I became the man of business in earnest ; the farm looked brighter in consequence, and farming life became quite a pleasurable excitement. I heard from Thirsk occasionally ; his letters were less full of satire and irreverence ; he seemed gradually taking a more hopeful view of his position.

“ I think there is a chance of dropping in for something good,” he wrote in his last letter ; “ I will give you the details when the good luck comes.”

“ That Sir Richard Freemantle was at work to some purpose, I had no doubt, so I waited for the promised news, and trusted for his sake that it would arrive before the dark hour fell for ever on him and his home. I knew he was not one to wait patiently for any length of time, and that “ hope deferred,” in his case, would make a desperate man of him.

It was in the autumn months, when I was drawn back into the old vortex from which I had made an effort to emerge, but drawn back never again to the moral weakness from which I had escaped by a miracle. Ever distant that day, thanks to Heaven and Harriet Genny !

The summons to the old world came from Robin Genny himself. It was a letter from a lock-up in Chancery Lane, and underlined was the word *private*, at the top of the page which I unfolded.

A letter of considerable length, written with a hand that had been unsteady at first, but had gathered nerve as it proceeded ; in a style that was easy and careless in many portions, laboured and painfully studied in others, but that from beginning to end betrayed not the slightest sense of shame at his position, or at the recklessness that had brought him thus low. He spoke of the uncomfortable ness of his position, of the enemies he had in the world, and the paucity of friends ; never a word about his past misconduct, or his faithful wife, whose life had been a sacrifice and martyrdom. It was a letter that stood as a fair exposition of his character—clever and witty to a certain extent, but cruelly, if unwittingly, heartless throughout.

“ I write to you, my dear Neider,” he concluded, “ because, in the first place, you have testified a friendship for me that I have hardly deserved ; and, in the second—I speak frankly—because you are the only man of my acquaintance

who is able to help me at this pinch, even for so beggarly a sum as eighty-seven pounds. Had I not been certain of laying before you a scheme for a prompt repayment of that money, of course I would not have hinted for the requisite ‘needful’ to free me from this ‘durance vile.’ If you will favour me with a look-in this afternoon, you will eternally oblige,

“Your faithful friend,

“ROBIN GENNY.”

In search of that faithful friend I went that afternoon, and found him with a quart mug of porter before him, and a long clay pipe in his mouth.

I had kept my mission to London a secret ; and with that “requisite needful” at which he had delicately hinted, in my pocket, I arrived at Chancery Lane, to inquire into the nature of those difficulties which had naturally closed round him.

Robin Genny was so glad to see me, that I thought he would never leave off shaking my hand.

“I always knew that you were a trump-card,” said he. “By Jove ! how can I ever thank so good a fellow as you are ? ”

“By not getting into this mess again, or the last friend may be missing.”

“If I ever borrow a penny again, or spend a penny that is not rightfully my own, may I be left to die of despair in the pleasant shades of Whitecross Street ! ”

“Where is Mrs. Genny ? ”

“At home, or wandering about trying to appease flinty-hearted creditors, or engaged on some mission which is sure to go wrong without money to back it. Upon my soul,” he cried lightly, “I think she could get on in the world much better without me. She’d have less worry, and always know where I was. It is the uncertainty of my whereabouts that keeps her unsettled.”

“You will set to work with a mind a trifle more stable after this ? ”

“To be sure.”

“Or you had better stay here.”

“That’s true enough. But the burnt child fears the

fire, you know, Neider. Have you brought the money with you?" he asked, eagerly.

"Yes."

"Then I'll just give you an idea of my scheme for repayment," said he. "You remember me speaking of a new magazine to Thirsk?—well, I have the plan all cut and dried now, and it will be a fortune to every one concerned in it."

"That's lucky."

He looked hard at me, as if a certain dryness in my tones had suggested my doubt of his assertions. He began to launch forth into a mass of details, upon which he had been pondering the last two days, and I did my best, in courtesy, to listen to him. But I had no confidence in the scheme, or in his capabilities for prosecuting it. I had come wilfully, and in cold blood, to get rid of eighty-seven pounds, and I entertained not the faintest idea of ever seeing one penny of my money back. I believed even in his heart that I had lost caste by my weakness, though he was not slow to profit by it. Writing to me had been a forlorn hope, on which he had not built much, and my appearance had been even a surprise to him.

He talked so much of repayment, as though to keep up my courage to settle what he termed "his little account," that I finally lost patience.

"You will repay me by showing that it is possible to become a steady man, and not break your wife's heart by a lack of moral courage!" I cried.

He stared at me.

"Well, I haven't been the best of Benedicts, perhaps," said he; "I must do all my work at home after this. Doctor Jennings told me only last week that I couldn't keep up much longer at the old rate—and if a fellow will not take his doctor's warning, why, he deserves the very worst."

He said it very heartily. I have no doubt he was full of the best resolutions for amendment then; that with no temptation before him in that hour, his heart was beginning to glow at the picture of his temperate future, with his wife happy by his side. He even grew enthusiastic over her merits.

"What a woman she has been!" he cried; "I should

have been dead without her. And never a harsh word, or a frown, at my brutish misconduct, or even a bucket full of tears, *à la Mrs. Thirsk*—but a gentle remonstrance at times, and always the right word in the right place. Upon my soul," he affirmed a second time, "I begin to think that I am hardly worthy of her."

A *naïve* confession, at which I could not help smiling; it was delivered with such heartiness, and yet with such latent egotism.

It took a little while to arrange matters, before Genny obtained his release. When he was free, he insisted upon carrying me home triumphantly in a Hansom cab, to receive the thanks of his wife. I resisted to the verge of rudeness, but he was as extravagant with delight as a child, and would receive no refusal. He held me firmly by the arm, and I could only have struggled with him for my release. We went to Gray's Inn Road, and he, talking loudly and gesticulating wildly, led the way to the house where his presence was unlooked for.

"Hymns of praise to the deliverer!" he cried, thrusting me forward into the room where sat Harriet Genny, pale and agitated, and Farmer Genny, looking as firm and as hard as a rock.

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## CHAPTER VIII.

### STORMY.

If Robin Genny had anticipated being received with much apparent rejoicing, he was doomed to a proportionate disappointment; and had I been a lover of thanks, or of visible demonstrations of gratitude, my reception would have certainly appeared chilling.

Harriet bade me good-day in a constrained and pre-occupied way, and let her husband seize her two hands and

shake them with but little attempt at a reciprocity of feeling ; her uncle did not rise, and motioned to his nephew and me to be seated.

" Well, isn't this a slice of luck now ? " cried Robin Genny.

" Ay, in its way," replied his uncle, who took the lead as spokesman, and even frowned down Harriet, who would have broken in here. " Mr. Neider," turning to me, " I've been boold enough to ask Mr. Grey for a holiday, in order to coom here and see my niece upon this matter."

" I don't think we need go into it, uncle," said Robin, easily ; " it's all settled and square, and Mr. Neider has been kind enough to steal a march on those good friends who might have helped me too."

" How did Mr. Neider learn your embarrassments, Robin ? " asked his wife.

" Upon my word, it's not worth while going into," said ne ; " and I see there are half a dozen letters on the mantelpiece that require answering. Will you pass them over, Harriet, dear ? "

The letters were given him, and he took them up one by one and examined their superscriptions. His uncle, who had been watching him all this time, suddenly burst forth—

" Can't ye pay attention for a little while, and not take it always so damed coolly ? Bean't it possible to put you into an honest passion, and make ye—joost for once—noicely ashamed of yourself ? Ye wrote to me, too, by the same post, and I'll take the liberty of answering ye."

Robin Genny laid down his letters at this adjuration ; he would have preferred fair sailing and calm weather, but storms were thrust upon him. He looked helplessly, almost imploringly, towards his wife, and she, in return, made one faint effort to stay her uncle's voice, but the old man stood firm and would not flinch. He answered his niece's glance, in his own way, however, and she coloured at his reply, which was as follows :—

" Ye're thinking it would be better talked over without Mr. Neider ; I'm thinking not, now we're so much indebted to him, and remembering the many talks we three have had together, and the little good it's doon that fellow there."

He pointed to Robin, who moved uneasily beneath the

finger of scorn, and fidgeted with the letters, and looked down at the table.

" Mayhap, with Mr. Neider to be a witness to his future promises, he'll make some stronger effort to keep 'em square."

" I cannot but think I am an intruder," said I, half rising.

" Sit ye doon—sit ye doon," roared Genny ; " I've much to say to ye, and ye can't go yet, Sir. We're in your debt at present."

" No, Sir—I ——"

" I say we're in your debt," repeated Genny ; " and we're all of one family here, who maun't have ye help us quite so fast ! Mr. Neider, will ye sit doon, now ? "

I sat down, and he drew forth a pocket-book, and took a letter therefrom.

" I'm thinking this came by the same post as yours," said Genny ; " my nephew thought at least he'd kill two birds—if it worn't more—with one stone. In it he talks aboot me being the only friend capable of helping him, and how sure he be to pay the mooney back—just as I have no doot he said to ye, Sir. He doan't say much of being sorry to foind himself in such disgraceful quarters, and he says never a word of the shame his woife must share with him. I don't see, in all the long story that these loines contain, one mite of feeling for anyone save—Robin Genny."

" I did not care to parade my feelings in a letter," he cried ; " have I been so hard and unfeeling a man that you should think of me like this ? "

" Ye're not very *hard*," was the dry rejoinder ; " and as for your feelings, why, ye've lots of 'em ready to hand, and to spare, for the matter o' that—but they're butterfly feelings, and doan't affect ye much. They're play-actors' feelings a'most, Robin—and last aboot as long."

" No, no !" he cried.

• " I say, Yes ! " and thump came the hand of his excited uncle on the table.

" Harriet, is this so ? " he cried, not feeling inclined to give up that point so easily.

" I have seen no evidence to the contrary for many a long month," she answered, sadly.

It was the first time in her life that she had sided against him, or seemed to do so, and he looked surprised at her rejoinder.

"How you have all mistaken me!" he said, in almost a whisper; and his restless hand took up the letters on the table, dropped them, and took them up again.

His uncle referred once more to the pocket-book, and then, with a sudden dash, some new bank-notes were fluttered across in my direction.

"They be yours, Mr. Neider," said he; "eighty-five pounds' worth—and there's two sovereigns to make eighty-seven;" and they were spun across the table after the notes—"and if ye'll let me know what extra legal expenses ye've been made to pay, I'll be obliged to ye."

"I can't have this!" I cried.

"Ay—but ye moost!" affirmed Genny, senior; "I can't have my niece obligated to ye. Most of my mooney—it bean't much now—would have coom to her some day—it's only a little afore the toime, now she's in such trouble. Ye can put it in your pocket, Mr. Neider, for I'll drop down dead before I take it back!"

"If it must be, then," I said.

"And now, Robin Genny, just attention."

The old master of Follingay farm leaned his two arms across the table, and bent his keen, grey eyes upon his nephew, who tried to bear up against them, and failed—as he always failed in everything.

"Will ye leave off that darmnable fidget with the letters?" he began.

"Go on—go on," said his nephew, impatiently.

"It's to me ye're indebted now, consider that. It's for your woife's sake, not your oon—consider that too, Robin. I've no more hope in my heart of your better goings on from this toime, than I ever had hope in the comfort which your marriage was to bring ye. If I'm deceived, Robin, ye'll make that heart much loighter, that's all."

"I have been unlucky."

"Ye ha' been a fool," said his uncle, "and led loike a fool, and had little will of your oon. Men more cunning than yourself ha' made a dupe and a laughing-stock o' ye; and ye've turned away from Harriet—your best friend!—and

sacrificed her for them. It's loike ye—it's been always loike ye, moind ! I haven't been here so many toimes, not to see how she's been suffering, and suffering more because she's fought to hoide it, and tried to make *me*, of all men, think how happy she was in her home and husband. I haven't watched ye, Robin, for her sake, and not foond out the folly o' the match that was brought round at last."

"I have been wrong," confessed Robin ; "let us end this !"

"When ye played fast-and-loose with her—loved her for a week or two, and then forgot her in Loondon—I had a hope that the engagement would end in nothing ; but when ye had worn her love oot, and toired her heart away from ye, ye bound her to the old foolish oath, and she, in the face of common sense, went with ye. She may say what she loikes, and ye may think it, but that's the truth, I saw with my own eyes."

Robin Genny had some pride, though it might be difficult to rouse. It flashed up then, and he turned towards his wife.

"Say all this is a lie, Harriet !" he cried.

She did not answer ; with one hand clutching the mantelpiece, as though to prevent herself from falling, she stood and listened to her uncle's torrent of invective, and watched the varying shades of her husband's countenance. She saw that he felt all the force of the rebuke, and she was building up new hopes from his remorse.

"Say he sits there speaking falsely, Harriet," he said again ; "wrong at least in that, he may think he has judged me before and since as incorrectly. I haven't been so bad ! God knows, I'm not bad now, Harriet !"

He waited for her answer.

"What can I say ?" she said ; "what is your idea of love ?—or what was it ever, Robin ? I married you in the hope of saving you from ruin—to be your companion and adviser, watching over you, and being ever faithful to you, and studying, with all my heart, and soul, and strength, to make this home a happy place, which you might prefer to all the world. I had promised your mother on her death-bed to do this—I did not shrink from the fulfilment, when you loved me less, and yet held me to my word."

“There !” cried Robin, triumphantly ; but the sad faces that met him dashed his exultation. He thought Harriet had confuted all aspersions, and yet, on second thoughts, it was a strange answer. He was considering it when she left the mantelpiece, and came and stood before him with her crossed hands on his shoulder. He looked up at her, and then down again. No, he could not meet *her* eyes then—they were too searching, bright, and fearless.

“I do not repine—I have never repined, Robin,” she said ; “if I have been cruelly disappointed in you, I have made no sign till now. Now, at this time, when for better, for worse, we set forth again together, I have let my uncle speak for your good and my own. I believe that he would like to speak of the future too—but I, who have a share in it, assert my right to dwell on that. Confessing now that the past life was killing me—for every minute of that life was a suspense—I confess to a hope that all is ended, and that there is before us something different and more bright. I only ask you, Robin, to believe it also, to cast off the old habits, trust in me a little, and let this be a home for both of us. It is my last chance of happiness, and your last chance of becoming an honourable man—shall we wreck them both together ?”

“No !”

He started to his feet, he wrung her hands in his, he caught her to his breast and kissed her, he dropped into his chair again, and burst into a passionate torrent of tears.

“Two friends—perhaps the only two ye have, Robin—bear ye witness in this room to that promise,” said Genny ; “I pray ye may have strength of moind to keep it.”

“I will—upon my soul I will !” he said, bringing forth, in the midst of his abandonment, that old, awful pledge to everything.

“Then we needn’t stay any longer, I’m thinking, Mr. Neider,” said the uncle.

“I’m ready,” I said, rising.

“If I ha’ been rather hasty, and forgotten joost now and then, Sir, that I’m the servant now, ye’ll not think of it ?”

“Is it likely ?”

“Ye see it’s cost me eighty-seven poonds to speak my moind, and the money wor hardly arned.”

"If——"

"I'm not regretting the loss so far as ye're concerned," said he, quickly; "I'll think it the blessedest lot of mooney ever spent if it makes a different place of this house, and a different pair of those two. Ha' ye anything more to say to me, nephew?"

"No, uncle—no."

He kept his face still covered with his thin hands, and continued to cry like a child. One hand of Harriet's still remained on his shoulder, and the anxious wife's face seemed shadowed even then with a doubt as she stood there, a watchful sentinel.

"Then good-bye to both of ye! I'll look in on your *new home* one day next week."

Harriet left her husband's side to thank me.

"I must have seemed unthankful, Mr. Neider, for your very generous intentions. Let me thank you now."

"There is nothing to thank me for, Mrs. Genny."

"This has been a strange and stormy meeting for you to witness here."

"After the storm comes a calm—you remember."

"God grant it!"

She turned away to hide the tears that sprang up in her eyes, and her uncle and I took our departure from the home wherein repentance had been promised, and which, judging by promises, was to be henceforth so bright.

\* \* \* \* \*

One part of this story may close here with a few more lines—the fewer the better, as the end is sad, and the vanity of human hopes, and the fallacy of human dreaming, sorrowfully exemplified. There are natures for some hidden reason known to the Great Ruler, so utterly weak, so devoid of a *something* that should make them rational, reflective beings, that it is hard to judge them by the common standard of what is right and honest. One might as well judge little children by the laws governing sober men and women; and it seems to me at least—I may be wrong and rash to think so deeply—that the radical defects which we were born with, or may inherit, will be considered in our favour when the scales are

turning against us in the day for which we sinners wait.

It was the nature of Robin Genny to be unstable. All his life he had meant well and acted badly—letting the impulse of the present hour sway his present actions. There was some awful defect in the vacillating brain that ruled him—a reckless inconsideration for others in the hour of temptation, or an utter forgetfulness of everything that he had sworn to but a little while ago. His mother had seen it, and prayed against it; his wife had seen it, and striven hard to find the remedy; he had become aware of it himself, and pledged his soul to work a cure.

And in a fortnight from that day the wife sat up for him night after night, and he came reeling home again, to cry, and promise amendment once more—and all the brightness of that life she had looked forward to, and yet despaired of, went out and left a greater density. We did not know it then, Genny and I; part of it we were able only to guess, by the end that came upon him suddenly—for Harriet was a wife who made no parade of her wrongs.

Robin Genny died of delirium tremens, before the promises, to which I had stood as witness, were three months old!

END OF THE FIFTH BOOK.

## BOOK VI.

“EVIL IS WROUGHT BY WANT OF THOUGHT.”

“Man wrongs, and Time avenges.”

BYRON.

“One adequate support  
For the calamities of mortal life  
Exists—one only: an assured belief  
That the procession of our fate, howe'er  
Sad or disturbed, is ordered by a Being  
Of infinite benevolence and power;  
Whose everlasting purposes embrace  
All accidents, converting them to good.”

WORDSWORTH.

## CHAPTER I.

## A LITTLE MYSTERY.

AFTER the death of Robin Genny our farm at Edmonton lost an able hand. Mr. Genny gave us formal notice of his departure, a fortnight or so following the loss.

"I ha' been thinking it all oover, Mr. Neider," said he, after the notice had been given, and received with regret by Grey and me; "and it's koind of braced up my pluck to go at the world again. I ha' got over the loss of my thoosands, and feel that with my two hoondred odd, there's a chance of living as a coomfortable little shopkeeper soomwhere, with Harriet for housekeeper. She be a widow, and alone in the world, and I maun think o' her a little."

"To be sure."

"When I was a richer man, I was maun hard in my ways, and she came in for a part of my ill-tempers, and the greed that was in me. I'm getting older and more sensible; and as she'll never marry again—'never's' her word, poor woman!—why, I must be soomthing loike a father to her while I live. She was always my favourite niece, and I can't see her standing by herself in those black weeds. It goes to the heart that be now a little softer, Sir."

"It was always a good heart, Mr. Genny."

"I'm obliged to ye for saying so," said he, with a bow; "though I'm not so sure of it myself. Do ye moind how I turned poor Mercy away, because she had brought me no character to back her?"

Surely I remembered that, and surely Grey did, by his red face and extra attention.

"I ha' been speaking to her lately—wanting her to live with Harriet and me, in the new house I think of taking, but she woan't leave that wretched old father o' hers. She has a silly fancy that she's a check upon him, and he goes on in much the same style—a kind of harder and ~~an~~ bly

likeness of what poor Robin was. I'm thinking," he said, heartily, "when it pleases the Lord to take him too, it will be a blessed comfort to every one of his acquaintance."

"What shop do you think of opening, Mr. Genny?" I inquired.

"I wouldn't moind a corn-chandler's—it remoinds me of the horses and the farm a good deal; or I wouldn't moind a cottage with a fair bit of land to it—just an acre or two—to potter over and get a living from. Ah! that last would be maun to an old farmer's taste now."

Grey and I exchanged glances. There was a small cottage on our land, let to one of our farm-labourers; if we were to add a few acres from the broad lanes attached to our farm, and sub-let to Matthew Genny, it would please our old master, and I nodded to Grey, as senior partner, to make the offer.

"Ye doan't mean it!" cried Genny, looking ten years younger at the suggestion; "why, that's good of ye, boys, and I'll never forget it. It's what I wouldn't ha' doon on my own land, though; for people will interfere and get to hoigh words when they're next door to each oother, and at the same occupation."

"You would not have refused the old master who perhaps taught you farming in *his* day," I said.

"Ay, that makes a difference."

So in due course the cottage was tenanted by Matthew Genny and a silent young woman, who wore a widow's cap. I went there once or twice in the first week after their arrival; but her looks told me plainly that I was an intruder, taking advantage of my position, and assured me that to see me in the early days of her widowhood was simply to give her pain. My presence there brought all the old associations too keenly to her mind, and perhaps she could not trust me even yet! I gave up visiting Matthew Genny; I saw no more of his niece. If there had been a fitful, flashing hope of a new life for me, I gave it up; not that I loved her less, or doubted my power to make her happy—but that I read upon her face no pleasure at my visits, no embarrassment at meeting me. Naturally we crossed each other's path by chance sometimes, but the greeting became ever more cold and distant, and I read a truth therefrom, in which my pride

could but acquiesce. There had been a visionary hope within me, but it went farther and farther from me, and left me with Grey and my mother in the farm-house parlour.

So time went on—a quiet, matter-of-fact time, that I did not think to see disturbed again, and little dreamed that the elements of storm and discord were only gathering strength by their inaction. Not so much a storm to sweep over me and mine, but to fall on others whose names have passed before the reader in these pages, and to affect me in my turn.

Six or seven months had passed ; the spring had come again ; the farm was profitable ; Grey and I were at least outwardly content—Grey was content, for there was true philosophy inherent in him—the calm weather appeared to have finally settled down upon us, when Sir Richard Free mantle made his second appearance at the farm.

“ You see I have not forgotten you, Mr. Neider,” he said on entering ; “ but I have been very busy in my way, and you have not troubled me with much news.”

“ I have had no news to communicate, Sir Richard.”

“ Pardon me, but you are Mr. Thirsk’s friend, and any news concerning my sister’s husband is of great importance to me. I think you promised to let me know,” he added reproachfully.

“ Pardon me, in my turn, but I did *not* promise.”

The baronet looked surprised.

“ Any news of great importance I would have willingly communicated,” said I ; “ more especially if it were good news. But I made no promise to play the spy, however worthy your intentions respecting Mr. Thirsk may be.”

“ Spy ! ” echoed Sir Richard ; “ my dear Sir, you don’t think for a moment that I consider you a spy ? ”

“ No. But you expected me in some respects to act like one.”

The baronet shook his head. He could not, and he would not, see it in that light.

“ I merely wished for news of him. News that might afford me an idea of his present temperament, and which acting upon, might tend to good.”

“ I believe that.”

“ Thank you.”

“But such news was readily obtainable from your sister, whom you visited in his absence.”

Sir Richard stood regarding me with a blank expression. He had not intended to place at that time all his confidence in me, and was amazed at my knowledge of his tactics. He was alarmed, too, at that knowledge, for he said at last—

“Mr. Thirsk does not know—anything?”

“Fortunately, no.”

“How came *you* to know, Mr. Neider?”

“Your sister’s manner suggested the suspicion.”

“She must be more on her guard, or she will betray all,” exclaimed this amiable conspirator.

“Is not this a dangerous game to play, Sir Richard?” I observed; “and you will excuse me, but is it the right way to proceed with Mr. Thirsk?”

“I will be glad to hear of another way, Mr. Neider.”

Another way did not suggest itself to my mind just then.

“Seeking out Mr. Thirsk and offering my friendship—my influence, my money—would that offer be fairly received, do you think?”

“I fear not.”

“And for my sister’s sake—for my sister’s child’s sake—that influence, and that money, must be exercised now. He has fallen in position—and his moods are so variable, that it is impossible to see at present whether this trial will be for evil or good. I find his wife hopeful one day, on the verge of despair a second—now buoyed up by a few careless words of affection, then deserted for a week together. If he neglect his duty to my sister, I have a brother’s to perform. I would be more open and straightforward, if I were dealing with a more straightforward nature.”

“I do not doubt it, Sir Richard,” said I, “but—”

“But again!” he said, a little peevishly.

“But you were very hard on one Mercy Ricksworth, for not acting quite straightforwardly—for acting as she also thought best for the happiness of Mrs. Thirsk.”

“I do not set myself up as immaculate,” said the baronet; “more, I confess I was too harsh and precipitate with Mercy. Since then I have striven more than once to make amends to her—and—and we are very good friends now.”

“And she aids you in a manner similar to that for which she was summarily dismissed.”

“For her mistress’s good this time. You are hard upon me to-day, Mr. Neider.”

“I have been thinking over the singular changes that have happened to reverse the position of you and Mr. Thirsk—it is all a tangled skein, the unravelling of which must become a matter of difficulty.”

“I am not sure of that,” was the confident answer.

“I am glad to hear it.”

“You have not seen Mr. Thirsk lately?”

“No, but I have heard from him more than once. And it appears to me that his letters are imbued with a better feeling, and speak of a mind more reconciled to his position.”

“I am very glad,” said Sir Richard, heartily.

“He appears falling into the track of literature; many articles which he has written have been fairly criticised and talked about—and fair words are a great incentive to exertion.”

“My sister Agatha sometimes fancies that *your* fair words have done him no little good. I am sorry that you have not seen him lately.”

“It is difficult to find him,” I remarked; “I hear that he is more steady—and there is an adage concerning leaving the well alone.”

“A foolish adage, that would keep the world at a stand-still.”

Sir Richard did not stay long at the farm; he had obtained but few particulars, and the object of his coming scarcely appeared to be apparent. Of Nicholas Thirsk and his movements, his sister could better inform him than I. Thirsk and I had not met for months, and his letters were few and far between. After the baronet had gone, the fancy came to me that he had wished to prepare me for a change—had intended a revelation perhaps of importance, had I not touched his dignity a little, by discoursing of that innocent duplicity which, for the good of his brother-in-law, he had recently adopted.

And yet he had been a man to keep something back all his life; outwardly cold and unobservant, and restraining

his affections from becoming too assertive. With a feeling heart, ever under a veil, his character had not been guessed at by his more impulsive sister, who had judged him by his abstracted air and his uncongenial studies. Candidly speaking, the baronet's nature was not a noble one; there were too many tortuous paths in it to raise it very high. He was a man who meant well, but who prosecuted most of his good actions in a secret, underhand way that did not often end well. People misjudged his character, and misrepresented his actions; in the past he had made an enemy of Nicholas Thirsk; in the present he might do the same, if he were not extremely cautious. If Thirsk were once more suspicious of the movements of the baronet, all the latter's card-board schemes must inevitably fall beneath a mind more hard, perhaps more designing, than his own.

The baronet's visit was not three weeks old before the little mystery that might have enwrapped it gave signs of clearing up. Nicholas Thirsk himself arrived on horse-back at the farm. Time, or sober thought, or friendly appreciation of his literary efforts, had ostensibly rendered his fall in life less irksome. His face was no longer shadowed by that morbid train of thought, which, impressed on so swarthy a countenance, almost verged on the Satanic; there was a laughing look in his bright eyes, and he carried his head on his shoulders with a lightness and ease very new to him at any time. If he had stepped once more into his fortune of sixty thousand pounds, he could not have appeared in better spirits that day. Still his was a variable countenance; to-morrow, a check to his plans, and he would be next door to a maniac; to-day, a windfall, however light, in his way, and if it pleased his fancy it would utterly transform him.

He sprung from his horse, and woke up the echoes of the farm by shouting over the palings of the yard at some men who were working beyond—

“ See to my mare, and don't get within range of her hind heels, for she's playful at times.”

After this caution, he came along the garden path towards the house. His instructions had been worth attending to, for in a few moments two or three men were dancing

round the mare, whose evolutions kept them at a distance, and two more were hanging on to the bridle, and trying to "hold her head," as the term runs, and one was on his back in the road.

"That's a dangerous horse for the father of a family to ride," said I, meeting Thirsk, and shaking hands with him.

"Only a mare of mettle," observed Thirsk ; "I abominate jog-trot quadrupeds, with no fire in them. And when there is fire at my brain and hope at my heart, I like to dash along, Neider."

"What has happened ? "

"Good news has happened for once—won't you congratulate me ? "

"With all my heart," said I ; "come in."

We entered the farm-house parlour, where my mother awaited an introduction to Nicholas Thirsk. It was quite a ceremonious affair that introduction—Thirsk made a profound bow, and treated my mother with reverential courtesy. I had an idea that Mr. Thirsk was inclined even to verge on the burlesque, in the few remarks with which he favoured my mother—remarks on her son, his virtues, accomplishments, and industry, in all of which my mother coincided, and inwardly considered Mr. Thirsk one of the most amiable—not to say discerning—gentlemen she had ever had the pleasure to meet.

Thirsk turned a laughing look in my direction when he had finished his encomiums.

"Don't you agree with us, Neider ? "

"Oh ! of course."

"And here's Grey to agree with us also," said Thirsk, as my partner entered at this moment ; "we are singing to the praise and glory of Alf Neider, matter-of-fact man."

"Who says he's matter-of-fact ? " said Grey, after the first salutations were over.

"His life says so," answered Thirsk ; "his practical, unpoetical, persevering farmer's life. Did he ever nurse a romance or a folly, or a wrong, to throw him off that aggravating equilibrium of his ? "

"Perhaps he did," said Grey, sententiously.

"I won't believe it," answered Thirsk; "I had my ideas once regarding him, but I was mistaken. And if he is unimpressible, and thoughtful, and keeps his heart from going off at full galop, why, he's an enviable being, who can smile at such rackety scamps as you and I, Grey."

"Ah!—rackety scamps, indeed!" said Grey.

"One or two of the Neider sort would make excellent friends for us ne'er-do-wells," continued Thirsk; "but they keep their distance, and turn rusty when their good advice is not instantly followed—forgetting that there are some soils which take time to be permeated. Neider, you deserted me!"

"Not till half-a-dozen attempts to discover your whereabouts."

"Forgiven, Sir, forgiven, or I should not be in this farm of yours. Pooh!—it's horribly hot here!—let us escape into the fresh air and sunshine, where I can breathe freely. Show me your land, and let me offer you my wise opinion upon the condition of the crops—was not I a farm-pupil once?"

Grey took this as a hint not to accompany us, and Thirsk and I went over the land—or, rather, over the first field—across which he and I walked, and talked of the better days in store for one of us.

"For time has been more kind to me than I deserved, Neider," said he, passing his arm through mine; "and for once the grim Parcae scowl not at me. Is a salary of five hundred a-year to be despised in these grasping times, Neider?"

"Certainly not."

"Then congratulate me, and the lucky lift that is to take me out of Eccles Street, Chelsea, and be damned to it!—that is to free me from desk work, and the eternal spin-spin of the brains, and the proof-sheets, and be—no, I won't consign them to purgatory too. Wish me joy, old fellow—the sun rises on a dark estate, and chases away half the shadows."

We shook hands together over the prospect of his future position in life; he was in high spirits, light-hearted, and extravagant. He was a man born for a loftier position than

my own, and an approach to it as surely changed him for the better, as a descent to the minor cares of a shabby-genteel life had reduced him to the worse.

“ My father brought me up to consider myself a rich man—the heir to an estate the old rascal had already mortgaged, and to a name that has gained a wonderful celebrity in West-end hells and on West-end pavements after midnight. My father, the studious man, and the man of science, as people call him—glory be to his name for ever and ever, though ! ”

“ I don’t see what you are driving at, Thirsk.”

“ Don’t you see that I am in an effervescent mood,” cried he, “ and can say nothing—explain nothing—soberly and rationally ? ”

“ Make the effort for once.”

“ To oblige you, here goes.”

We were arm-in-arm again, and he was walking with me at a rapid pace across the meadow.

“ My father offers to smoke the pipe of peace again—writes me a letter, informing me that he is aware of a parliamentary gentleman of distinction, who requires a private secretary, and can stand five hundred pounds per annum, and a snug villa on his estate into the bargain. And my father thinks of his son, and accepts at once for that estimable young gentleman.”

“ And it is settled.”

“ Almost. I open a correspondence with the M.P., and all things are agreed upon ; I suit the M.P., and the M.P.’s salary suits me, and there’s a margin of time for the literary market, if I am ever inclined to supply it. I was on a special message in the country when the last news came, and was expected to remain there a few days, and report the full particulars of four days’ racing for the *Bunkum Chronicle*. As if I could remain four days on a desolate island with this good news to gloat over ; as if I could write reports upon horse-racing, with this tale to relate to all my friends and acquaintances.”

“ I thought that you never had any friends, Thirsk.”

“ Well, only one. And a sly, dry humbug he is. Look at him.”

And he thrust me suddenly from him with a hearty force.

"I throw up my commission, come express to London, and hire a horse of mettle to bring me to Edmonton. You are the first to hear of the good luck that is in store for me."

"Thank you for the preference—but your wife?"

"She and the baby will be the next recipients of glad tidings. And you shall ride back with me to town and participate in the general sunshine. God save the queen, and all members of parliament in authority under her—especially those who require private secretaries."

I could not very well refuse to accompany him to London. I had had so little opportunity of witnessing his genial moods, that to excuse myself just then was hardly grateful, after the trouble he had taken to discover me. I believe that Thirsk really set me at the head of his friends—that there was a wild, fitful attachment in his heart towards me; and believing it, I could not refuse him on this auspicious occasion the satisfaction that he fancied my company might bring him.

I was a little curious also to see the effect the news would have on Mrs. Thirsk, and to discuss the changes it might bring to both of them. So my own mare was saddled, and we rode away to London together.



## CHAPTER II.

### AFTER THE CALM.

THERE was not much opportunity for discussion offered on the road to London, Nicholas Thirsk's vicious horse keeping up a small *furore* all the way, and Nicholas, in the height of his excitement, wanting to leap hedges and to race me along the road.

I strove to bring him to a more rational mood by de-

preciating the advantages of the change awaiting him, whenever there was an opportunity of keeping our horses side by side.

"Don't think all the happiness of life is coming with five hundred a-year, Thirsk," I said; "surely you earn as much now, or your profession earns less than the world gives it credit for."

"I may earn it. I have not counted up the receipts," said Thirsk in reply; "but it's an unsettled living for me—and the truth is, I can't sober down to incessant scribbling. And then there are so many good fellows to spend my money amongst; late hours to keep, house rent and taxes to pay, and it's not like a regular income to a man. And as I haven't a good name for punctuality and despatch, why, it's only a windfall here and there that drops to my share. Besides, as a private secretary, the hours are to be few and the pay handsome, Neider."

"If you turn more prudent and steady, it will be a good change, Thirsk."

"I have been thinking it all over. I am going to be a first-class moral creature after this!" he cried.

"Do you mean it, or do you jest?"

"I mean it this time," said Thirsk; "I have been thinking it all over in the railway train, in the intervals between my prayers and thanksgivings."

"Ah! it's a jest, I see."

"No, it is not," said Thirsk, for a moment assuming a more serious tone; "for the thought did strike home to me that there were many hundreds more deserving of my luck, and that I had not been a good husband, father, or anything else. I had been selfish and full of evil, and as dangerous to trifle with as a powder-magazine—taking misfortune with a curse, and a stroke of good luck as a right to which I was entitled. Now the steady times are really coming!"

"I am glad to hear you say so."

"No more wild dashes in search of excitement or forgetfulness—no more of the fiery waters of Lethe to be had at every licensed victualler's—temperate, and calm, and methodical from this time forth. Hurrah!—see me bilk the toll-keeper, and astonish his weak nerves!"

He dug his spurs into the mare's side, he struck her furiously with his whip, and away he went, at a headlong pace, through the open turnpike gate, and down the broad road beyond, before the toll-keeper had time to urge the faintest remonstrance.

As I paid for Mr. Thirsk, there was not much gained by his rapid dash past, and as he remembered, a moment afterwards, that the ticket he had paid for passing through that afternoon covered his return, there was only a laugh at his own effort to be dishonest in spite of himself.

We reached Chelsea before dark ; when we were in Eccles Street he said—

“ We must stable our horses for half an hour or so.”

“ You do not intend a long stay at home, then ? ”

“ We dine out,” said Thirsk ; “ it is late, and Agatha is not prepared for our reception. After dinner we will return, and spend the evening together *en famille*. What ! ” he cried, “ do you fear me in the very first step that I make ? ”

A livery stable having been discovered, in the neighbourhood of Eccles Street, we left our horses in charge, and repaired to that little residence beyond the posts, where the scenes of Thirsk's home drama had had but little lightness in them.

But the lightness was coming then, he thought ; the sun had risen on the new life, and the new hopes were coming with it. He thought so standing there with its brightness on his face.

He rattled away merrily at the knocker.

“ Agatha calls this my good-tempered knock,” said he ; “ see with what a radiant countenance she will forestall that slavey of ours, and forget my interdict upon her answering the door. There was never such a girl to forget in the world ! ”

Mrs. Thirsk answered the door, but not with that radiant countenance which he had prophesied, and I had even anticipated. On the contrary, with a scared white face that startled both of us, and with a trembling hand pressed to her bosom to still its agitation.

“ Nicholas—Nicho—las ! ” she gasped.

"What's the matter?" asked Thirsk; "has anything happened?"

"N—no, dear, nothing has happened. Only you are here so suddenly; and you talked of being absent all the week."

"To be sure I did, but fortune strikes in and upsets the wisest of schemes," replied he; "and it's good fortune this time, Agatha."

"I am very glad!" she said, faintly.

"Are you not very glad to see an old friend too?" he asked.

"To be sure I am. Will you forgive my rudeness, Mr. Neider? But—but this is a very great surprise!"

She led the way into the parlour, and presently we three were seated, looking from one to the other.

"This is an odd kind of reception, Agatha," said Thirsk; "especially as there is nothing the matter, as you have been kind enough to inform me, and you do not appear very anxious about my good news."

"Oh! yes, I am," said she; "it is so long a time since there has been any good news to communicate, that—that it is a surprise, dear, and takes time to prepare for."

"Well—it will keep. Let us have a light, Agatha—the evening is dark."

Agatha rang for the servant; the candle-lamp was ordered, and finally placed on the table. Thirsk kept his news to himself till everything was in fair order, and Agatha composed. He was not going to hurry matters, and bark good intelligence.

Once, before she sat down, he asked if the boy were asleep, and received an answer in the affirmative—still in tones that trembled very much.

"Why, what a baby you are!" cried Thirsk, good-naturedly; "as frightened at my appearance as if I were the demon of discontent, all black and red, like an imp in a pantomime. Courage, my girl, or you will never be able to hear this story of good fortune."

When she was sitting near him, he laid his hand upon her shoulder, in a gentle and affectionate manner so new to him that she coloured with pleasure, till the old fear smote her and turned her pale again.

“Now, are you ready ?”

“Yes.”

She glanced irresolutely from him to me, and then made an effort at attention.

“I have thrown up my engagement as special reporter, to accept that of private secretary, at a salary of five hundred pounds per annum. We shall give up this dark, benighted dust-hole for a place wherein we can draw breath and find a pure atmosphere to draw. The new life, with that new leaf to be turned over which I have long promised you !”

“I shall be very happy !” she cried ; but her joy was not visibly portrayed, and there was still embarrassment upon her features, and in her very attitude, which was restless and uneasy. Thirsk, in his own excitement, did not see this so readily as myself, who had come to watch—was to a certain extent behind the scenes, and could form a shrewd guess from what particular quarter this good fortune had been wafted to him.

Agatha Thirsk, I fancied, almost betrayed her prior acquaintance with the story, by feigning so little surprise at the tidings, and I began to fear that a dim suspicion of the truth would soon suggest itself to her husband.

“I am very glad,” she repeated ; “it will be a great change for you and me.”

“You do not realise it yet ?”

“Scarcely, dear,” she inurmured.

“It will not be a town house in Bedford Square, and a host of servants at one’s command ; but I think it will be a happy little villa for you, and me, and baby—surely our happiest time is coming, with the better luck that has dropped to our feet.”

“Oh, Nicholas !” said she, suddenly flinging herself into his arms ; “it will be a happy time, indeed, if we are together a little more ; if you will not think me quite a child, and make me—just a little more—your companion and friend !”

“Never mind what I have thought you, *mon enfant*,” he said ; “does it matter what were the thoughts of a wild and despairing man ?—see, I puff them away to the shadows !”

“It will be happiness, then.”

“I must have a look at the boy—he always took to his father, you know, and made you jealous of my influence. If I had been more of a home-bird, I should have stolen all his love away. Neider, come and look at the young one ?”

“You—you will wake him, Nicholas. Oh, Nicholas !—you—”

“This has been too much of a shock to your nervous system, Agatha. If you would but learn to control yourself a little.”

She shrank away, like a cowed child. Trained in a hard school to learn the dark signs from his looks, she fell back to her place.

“Perhaps your ugly mug, Neider, would scare the young one,” said Thirsk, turning to me with a laugh ; “but I’ll just have one look at him, like an amiable father, as I am—going to be ! Agatha, touch the bell.”

The bell was rung, the servant appeared, and a light was ordered. Presently Nicholas Thirsk was leaving the room with a chamber candlestick in hand. He looked at his wife again before he left us.

“Upon my honour, Agatha, you puzzle me.”

She did not answer, but I fancied that her hands clasped themselves tighter together, and her cheek took a shade more ghastly hue.

“Try and get a smile to that grim young lady’s face, before I return,” said he, with a laugh, as he left the room.

The door had scarcely closed before Agatha Thirsk had sprung to my side, and laid both hands upon my arm.

“Oh ! tell me what to do ?—oh ! tell me what to do, Sir.”

“What is it ?—what has happened, Mrs. Thirsk ? Good Heavens !” I cried, as the thought suddenly suggested itself, nothing has happened to the child ?”

“No, no—God forbid !” she exclaimed ; “but the—the child is not there !”

I regarded her with speechless amazement ; the child gone, and the man whose nature was excitable and ungovernable, on the verge of the discovery.

"What has become of the boy?" I gasped.

She wrung her hands, and for a moment made no answer. Suddenly, as his footsteps paused over head she said:—

"The boy is at my brother's house at Welsdon in the Woods. Oh! what am I to do?—what am I tell him?"

"I can but suggest the truth."

"If he would only listen patiently, or allow me to explain," she cried; "but the very name of my brother is hateful to him!"

Nicholas Thirsk was heard descending the stairs. At every step that advanced nearer to the sitting-room I could see her face assume a more terrified expression. She went back to her seat by the table, and sat there with her large dark eyes turned towards the door. My own heart beat uncomfortably for the poor, timid woman who held her husband in fear.

The door opened, and, with all the light and life quenched from his dark face, Nicholas Thirsk re-entered.

"Agatha," said he, in a quick, sharp voice, "where is the boy?"

Her lips parted to reply, but no sound issued thence. Her vacillating gaze wandered in my direction. She had told me where he was; would I take her part, and explain to him where the boy had gone?

"Where is the boy?" he shouted; "you I ask, Agatha. Am I to have an answer or not?"

"At—at Richard's."

"Richard Freemantle's?" he cried.

"Yes—yes—he ——"

"Stay, let me think of this. I must be dreaming, going mad, or something. Sir Richard Freemantle in possession of my child, and the mother sitting at home contented here. By God! I must be going mad!"

And he struck the table with his hand so violently that the table lamp clattered half across the table, and would have fallen had he not instinctively stopped its further progress.

Agatha Thirsk had found her voice at last. She was standing at his side, explaining in a rapid, almost incoherent

manner. She had put her hands upon his shoulder, but he had shaken them away—there was no love in his dark face then, and all signs of the new life that was coming to them both had vanished in a breath.

“He loves the boy so passionately, Nicholas dear,” she pleaded; “and he came here to see me, and make peace with us; he talked so much of the boy being his heir, when he should die childless, and alone in the great house at Welsdon.”

“He has been here more than once?”

“Yes—once or twice, and he has always taken to our boy, and the boy to him, young as he is, Nicholas. And he prayed so hard to let Mercy ——”

“Mercy Ricksworth?”

“Yes.”

“Go on—go on—to let Mercy ——”

“To let Mercy go back with him and the boy to the Hall for a few days, whilst you were absent and could not miss him. And he is his uncle, Nicholas dear; and if we refuse to be indebted to my brother for any advantages in this life, we should not neglect our duty to our child.”

“Hark at this poor weak fool talking of duty—she who forgets that to her husband every day, and mocks her marriage oath by a fool’s step like this! Agatha Thirsk, you have deceived me. You are like your brother, crafty and designing; you fight always in the dark, and are not what I thought you. Ever from to-day to be under suspicion, and know no trust and confidence from me.”

“Oh!—Nicholas, Nicholas!—you will not be so cruel!”

“Distrust for distrust, you woman with the baby’s brain! You child with no common sense—who never knew discretion in your life, and are not to be expected, I suppose, to show it now. Only a woman in appearance, who has marred my life, clogged all my efforts, cursed me by inaction and lack of sympathy and moral force.”

“A woman who has loved you all your life, and been your slave, and uttered no murmurs at your tyranny!” cried Agatha, with more spirit than I had anticipated—“who has a right to ask you to spare her the shame of this degradation before him you call your friend.”

"Ha!—I had forgotten him," said he, with a quick glance towards me. "Neider, I am sorry you should remain here a witness to this little scene of domestic felicity. And you are dinnerless, too, and have ridden, like me, some eight or nine miles. Let us be moving."

"You—you will not leave me like this, Nicholas?"

"Pardon me, madam, but I have an appetite."

She went back to her chair by the table—the old strange mood, irreconcilable with everything, and therefore in its working impossible to guess at, had come over him. The hard, sarcastic, bitter mood, that took no impression, and spared no one.

"When will you be home?" she asked.

"I cannot say, Mrs. Thirsk—in a week, two, three—it depends upon circumstances."

"Nicholas!" she pleaded.

"You will be pleased to write, or go, or send for my boy. You have taken the trouble to send him away, in defiance of my wishes; that his mind may be poisoned against me, as my father's was in the old times—for no other motive that I can understand. When that boy is at home again I will return."

"I will go at once!" she cried.

"Upon second thoughts, I will write a letter to Sir Richard Freemantle," said he; "you will keep to your home, madam, or I will never enter it again. Don't look alarmed, Mrs. Thirsk, it shall be as polite a note as my indignation will allow—I have nothing wherewith to reproach the baronet, and I have not been mistaken or treacherously deceived in him."

"Nicholas!" she pleaded again.

At every harsh allusion to the deceit practised against him, she winced as though a blow had struck her. And they were blows upon her heart, which had always beaten truly, despite that weakness at which he had recently scoffed.

"Of course, before I write, I shall take the trouble to convince myself of the truth of all these assertions," he said; "I must not look ridiculous in more eyes than my wife and Mr. Neider's."

She flung her arms across the table, and buried her head

in them and sobbed ; but the man was of iron, and would *not* be moved.

“ Mr. Neider, I am detaining you—I *will* keep you in this unpleasant position, it appears. This way.”

“ I hope you are not going to leave Mrs. Thirsk like this.”

“ Like what, Sir ? ” he said, sharply.

“ Can you not see ? ”

“ Neider, my dear fellow, haven’t you heard of the old warning about non-interference between husband and wife ? ” he said—“ it’s a bad plan to interfere in these little family jars.”

“ Pardon me, I do not interfere,” I said ; “ but you talk of leaving your house, and your wife is left behind very weak, and in much tribulation — ”

“ Which she has brought on herself,” he cried, impatiently. “ Are you coming, or shall I leave to you the task of consolation ? ”

“ I am so much better by myself,” murmured Agatha.

We went out of the room together. As he stood with his hand on the door-handle, Agatha faintly called his name.

“ What is it ? ” he asked.

“ Shall you be late to-night ? ”

“ I shall not be back to-night. I have told you so,” he answered, and a minute afterwards the door closed on us both.

We went along the paved square and through the posts to the livery-stable, where our horses awaited us. Thirsk flung himself into the saddle, dropped some money into the ostler’s hand, and rode off unceremoniously. I had a difficulty in overtaking him.

“ Do you wish to shake me off, Thirsk ? ” I said, when I was level with him ; “ you have only to say so.”

“ I am hasty. No, I don’t wish to get rid of you, though you take the part of my wife, who has acted like a fool and a traitor.”

“ Only like a woman, Thirsk, who has a natural love for a brother, and who has suffered herself to be persuaded to give up her child for a day or two. In your absence, too, when you could spare him.”

“Spare him!” he said, ironically; “you must think me a wonderful father if I couldn’t spare him now and then—if I couldn’t spare him for ever, for the matter of that.”

“Do you mean it?” I said, sternly.

He hesitated. He was not a man to lie deliberately, and he had a father’s love for the child.

“Well, I don’t,” he confessed; “why drive me so remorselessly into a corner, you *Tirante il Bianco*, squire of dames, and knight of Edmonton?”

“Because you are too stagy, and are not talking in a fair, every-day style.”

“You think I am in the wrong?”

He reined in his horse and looked me in the face. I could see his nervous hand fidgeting uneasily with his whip.

“Partly.”

“In my place you would have been naturally indignant at this paltry trick.”

“I should have been pained at the want of confidence, but I should have made every allowance for the peculiar position in which my wife had been placed.”

“Letting in by stealth a man who has been forbidden the house.”

“Her brother—her friend, companion, guardian from an early girlhood.”

“My enemy!”

“A man who wishes you well.”

“Then I am only partly in the wrong?”

“Partly. But you are adopting the wrong method of showing your indignation.”

“If you had said that I had been in the wrong,” said Thirsk, between his set teeth, “I should have cursed you and ridden away from you for ever. As to my method of showing my natural resentment at this trick, that is a matter of taste. I have my own idea as to the right move to check that confounded knave who steals my own child away from me.”

“You will do nothing rashly,” said I, as we moved on again.

“Everything soberly, of course,” said he, satirically; “I am a sober man, who has the upper hand of his passions, and says his prayers before making a false step. I wedded

in haste, and in my leisure moments I can think of the wife's duplicity, and the judgment that has followed a *mariage de convenance*."

"May I ask what you think of doing?"

"I don't know," was the answer; "my first impulse was to proceed at once to the Hall, and bring my child away. But I have sworn never to cross the threshold of his home, and I might hold him too tightly by the throat, if he came within arm's length of me. I must think how I can most humiliate the dastard."

"A bad frame of mind," I said. "Is this the same Nicholas Thirsk who came to my farm full of good spirits this afternoon?"

"The blue devils have chased the good spirits away," he replied, "and there is no fishing the last from the depths. I thought this afternoon that there was nothing in the world that could cast me back to my old self, little dreaming whence the blow would come to stagger me."

"Not your old self, Thirsk; not so bad as that!"

"I feel very much like my old self to-night," he said, ruefully; "it's hard to find that one's own wife has no confidence, and lives in a world of her own."

"Have you encouraged that confidence much?"

"Eh?"

And he turned in his saddle at the question I quietly put to him, and which I repeated to him after his interjection.

"Oh! I have played Bluebeard and Boanerges, and all the tyrants ancient and modern, to be sure," he said, with a sneer. "I have heaped reproaches on her head, hurled curses at her, thrown her out of window and jumped on her."

We rode on at a more rapid pace; he did not wish to continue that conversation, and I had suggested a doubt, despite his irony, as to whether his conduct in the past had been conducive to much confidence. And he had ever played the tyrant, as she had played the slave!

I was glad when the horses had been stabled, and we were in a private room of an hotel near the Strand. After dinner I had a hope that Thirsk would be more reasonable and rational—that, with a little time to cool, he would become a different man. But I was disappointed. The more he brooded on his wrongs the more his sullen nature

seemed to deepen, and to resist all attempts at mediation. His hatred of Sir Richard Freemantle was so intense, and his sense of injury was based for once on grounds that were so valid that he took a secret satisfaction in considering his injuries.

“ You don’t get over it, Thirsk,” I said.

“ I shall never get over it, Neider,” he returned ; “ the old fit is on me, and must last. Five hundred a-year and a private secretaryship will do me no good, hampered as I shall be with a lying wife. How do I know that all this is not an evasion ; that, in her childish fear of offending me she has not invented this specious tale to account for the boy’s absence ? To be with Sir Richard Freemantle appears to me wholly unnatural, and she sitting quietly at home—she, whose whole soul is wrapt up in that child.”

“ Your return, though improbable, was not impossible, and her absence at the same time would have alarmed you.”

“ Oh ! dreadfully,” he said, with a scornful laugh.

“ Probably you interdicted her visits to the Hall ? ”

“ Ah ! that is it ! ” he cried ; “ what a crafty evasion ! And I did not interdict the child, and so the specious reasoner sends him off to Welsdon. And I did not interdict the baronet’s visits to my house, because I never dreamt of such accursed audacity. Ring for the brandy ! ”

“ No.”

“ Have I taken too much wine for you already ? ”

He had drunk liberally in his excitement, but not enough to intoxicate him. I suggested, in as mild a form as possible, that he had taken sufficient for his health, rather more than sufficient for that grave deliberation on his domestic affairs to which he had resolved to devote himself.

He laughed.

“ Brandy postponed, *sine die*. And now,” rising with a darkling face, “ to business.”

“ What is the next step ? ”

“ I am going to Ricksworth, to see if Mercy is at home or not. Will you accompany me ? ”

“ I hardly think that I can trust you alone.”

“ Faithful follower ! —or guardian angel—which is it ? ”

“ A faithful follower, I hope.”

“ I will hope so, too.”

And the manner in which he stretched his hand across the table and shook my own, assured me that he *did* hope that, and that my remonstrance, in his favour and his wife’s, had not left any bad impression.

“ Do you know where these Ricksworths live, Thirsk ? ”

“ Yes,” he answered; “ Mercy has mentioned the address more than once. Are you ready ? ”

“ I am ready.”

We went out into the street together.



### CHAPTER III.

#### THE RICKSWORTHS’ HOME.

In a maze of streets between Holborn and Lincoln’s Inn Fields stood the particular street, or lane, or court, where the Ricksworths had chosen their London residence. A little house, admittance to which was suddenly down two steps into a cavernous passage, where people fell, stumbled, cursed and groped in darkness till some one made an appearance with a light. A street far from select, and the character of whose habitants were doubtful—a street watched by the police and vigilant detectives, and wherein more fights occurred in one day than in St. Giles’s in a week. A street in which Ricksworth had already made himself famous by his quarrels with his neighbours, and one or two popular resistances to legal authority, which necessitated half a dozen policemen and a stretcher.

“ A strange place for a heroine to draw breath in and grow strong,” said Thirsk, as we entered the streets.

“ A strange place for people who have been habituated to country life.”

Thirsk did not appear to know the number of the

house very well, and it was not till after an inquiry as to the whereabouts of the Ricksworths that we were falling, after the general rule, into the passage already mentioned.

A door opened on the left, and admitted a stream of light.

“Who’s there?” growled an unmistakable voice.

“Friends!” I ventured to respond.

“That’s a lie to begin with!” shouted back Peter Ricksworth, and Peter himself appeared, to look into the facts of the case.

“Let’s see the man who has the pluck to call himself my friend,” said Ricksworth, putting the light close to my face, and then to Thirsk’s.

The result of his scrutiny was a stare of amazement, succeeded by a hoarse laugh.

“If you’re friends we’re in luck’s way to-night,” he said; “friends with money in their pockets are allus welcome here. This way, gen’lemen.”

He led the way into a small, low-ceilinged room, damp, dark, and unwholesome, with the windows broken, and the wind rushing through the apertures unpleasantly, guttering the one flickering dip on the deal table. Slung across the room near the ceiling were some lines adorned with a few fragments of linen, that had undergone the process of ablation at an earlier hour; and sitting at the table, working at a pile of sailor’s Guernsey shirts, was Mrs. Ricksworth, more waxen, angular, and grim, than in even the past Welsdon days. In the corner of the room, asleep, or feigning to sleep, was a ragged being, whom I failed for the first moment or two to recognise, but who gradually impressed himself upon my mind as Ipps, the old, unfaithful servant of Follingay farm. One glance assured us that Mercy Ricksworth was not there.

“Here’s a seat welcome for one of you,” said Ricksworth, roughly; “it’ll bear you if you keep to the edge, and not whop down too suddenly—and ould Ipps has another. Hi! Ipps, you blundering sleepy devil, move your carcass, and make room for gentlefolks. Hi!” he shouted.

Ipps leaped up with some of his old alacrity, gave a groan at the pain his sudden movement had incurred, passed his

hand over his eyes, as if to make sure that our appearance there was not a dream, and with a downcast, sullen look, moved away from the corner wherein he had ensconced himself.

"You're allus in the way, you warmint," commented Ricksworth, pushing the chair in our direction with his foot, which, thanks to his length of limb, had, in a very ingenious manner, hooked the chair half across the room.

"I can't help it," muttered Ipps.

"This is my adopted, gentlemen," said he; "I takes care of him, and gives him a kind of lodging here. The board he manages to beg or steal for hisself—gen'rally steals, I think."

"You'll say anything, old Ricksworth," was the reply.

"Just hold your jaw, now; it wags a precious sight too much."

Ipps took up his position in an opposite corner, with his back to the wall, and his hands crossed on the stick that supported him in that half upright position. Crouching there, with his small, piercing eyes watching us, and never turning from us for an instant, in his dirt, and rags, and feebleness, and with that face of misery, he was a figure to scare one at that time. Ricksworth and his wife were pitiable objects enough, but in Ricksworth there seemed strength and life yet, and there was an energy in his wife that told of powers of resistance, and unflinching habits of industry. But in that feeble old man cowering there, there seemed bodily and mental prostration, utter abjectness and starvation. Thirsk glanced once towards him, and shuddered perceptibly at the sight of him. Did it strike him then that the figure was from his past, and reduced to dire extremity by *his* means?—did it suggest to him that he might stand answerable some day?

Mrs. Ricksworth plied her needle unceasingly; as we entered she had taken a cursory inspection of us through her glasses; but her time was valuable—talking distracted her attention, and she did not feel called upon to enter into conversation. Until the Guernsey shirts were done, there was no chance of a meal, and she was a woman who worked hard when an order came in.

"I s'pose no one has been and left us a fortun'?" asked

Ricksworth, as he took up his position with his back to the empty fire-grate.

"Not that I have heard of," said Thirsk drily, "I've come for a little information."

"I don't think we've much of that to give away."

"I can pay you, if it's necessary."

"Then we're open as the day—eh, missis?"

And he appealed to his wife, who muttered something in reply which no one comprehended.

"An ould gibbering cat as ever lived," growled Ricksworth; "I thought I had brought you to your senses last night."

"You knocked me down," said Mrs. Ricksworth, quietly; "and though I say it that shouldn't, you're a brute and a coward."

"Only when you rile me. And you'd rile the very devil sometimes. And when you say a word agin' that girl of mine, down you'll go agin' while I've strength in these 'ere pairs of fives."

And he held up his villainously dirty hands for public inspection.

"I said she was always leaving the house, and not helping me with an honest bit of needlework, and so she is. But I'm nobody—I never was."

"She's too good for you," said Ricksworth.

"Though I say it that shouldn't——"

"Stop, there!" shouted Ricksworth; "I woan't have it—I've said it all my life, and I woan't. If it wasn't for the supper you're arning to-night, I'd break your neck. Find fault with me as you ha' allus done, old woman, but just be civil to her. It's my only bit of pride to hear her spoke well on."

"She's a good girl in her way," muttered the discontented woman, "but it's not the right way, or I don't know it."

"You don't know it, you fool!" was her husband's uncomplimentary rejoinder.

"She's not dutiful; she was spoilt by that Miss Freemantle—though I say it that shouldn't before the lady's husband."

"My good woman, my feelings are not wounded," said

Thirsk, "and it is concerning your daughter that I wish to speak."

"Have *you* anything to say agin' her, Master Thirsk?"

"A little, perhaps."

"Doan't say it here then!" and the forbidding scowl of the father gave sufficient warning of the risk Thirsk ran. But Thirsk liked danger; it was an excitement for him, and the threat of this man appeared to rouse him.

"What I have to say, I shall relate in my own way and manner, fellow," said he haughtily.

"This is a poor house, but it's mine, remember."

"I will remember that."

"And don't rile me in it, Mr. Thirsk."

"Where's your daughter, man?"

"Is this the information you talked about paying for, now?"

"Yes—there's the fee."

He spun a crown piece towards Ricksworth, whose quick hand caught it and consigned it to his trousers pocket before the eyes of his wife had taken stock of the amount. And she had looked round very quickly too.

"My darter's gone in the country, for the benefit of her health."

"With my child, to Sir Richard Freemantle's?"

"You seem to know all about it, without my telling you," he said, with a stare of surprise.

"Am I correct?"

"You are."

"When is she likely to return?"

"In three or four days, and I with piles of work enough to break my heart, here," said the woman at the table.

"So far, so true," said Thirsk to me; "have we anything to stop for now?"

"I am not aware of anything."

"Has she been too sharp for you, Mr. Thirsk?" asked Ricksworth, with a hideous grin, that showed two formidable rows of tusks.

"She has taken my child to my bitterest enemy!—this paragon of excellence of yours!"

"What! do you owe my gentleman a grudge too?"

"I would give a thousand pounds to hear he was dead!"

cried Thirsk, with his old impetuosity. All allusion to the baronet appeared to throw him off his guard, and bring on his past extravagance.

"Say that again in cold blood, now, if you bean't afraid," said Ricksworth.

"I'm afraid of nothing."

"And you'd give a thousand pounds to hear he was dead, now?"

"Yes," cried Thirsk; "wouldn't it be worth a thousand pounds to be rid of my enemy, Neider?" said he, turning to me with his scornful laugh, "to have no one to hiss in the ears of my child and my wife all the slanders against me that malevolence can suggest? Hasn't he been the shadow on my path for many years?"

"Ah! and isn't he in the way of a fine fortune that would fall to your share, if anything should *unfortunately* happen to him. You could stand a thousand pounds out of so fat an estate, Master Thirsk?"

"Ay, and my blessing into the bargain."

"It's a good joke!" said Ricksworth, whose eyes would have been very appropriate in the head of a wild beast, "and you were allus fond of jokes."

"Fool! do you think that I should grieve to hear he was dead?"

"You're joking, I tell you."

"I am in the right mood for jesting," said Thirsk, ironically.

"Say it's earnest!" cried Ricksworth, eagerly.

"Stern, sober, real earnest," was the bitter reply.

"Thirsk, Thirsk, do you know what you are saying?" I remonstrated.

"It will reach his ears, and let him know my opinion of him better than I can write it," said he; "wherever I go from this time, I will proclaim my hatred and horror of that man. I will have no mercy on him, if he be ever in my power. I will hate him all my life, and bide my time to pay the debt I owe him."

"Let us go home," I urged.

"That's a raal, honest hate, Mr. Thirsk," observed Ricksworth.

"He's a thief, who has robbed me of my child, and your

daughter aids and abets him and my wife!" cried Thirsk beside himself; "by God, Neider, I am going mad over my wrongs!"

"You're playing the fool, Thirsk," I said bluntly.

"That's a matter of opinion. I have a reason for speaking my mind out here," he said.

"I see," muttered Ricksworth.

"Mercy will hear of this," said he to me, "and so the news will spread and sting the viper. I am ready now, Neider."

"Ha' you done with the chair?" asked Ricksworth, as Thirsk rose.

"Yes."

Ricksworth stretched out his thin leg, hooked his feet in the cross rail beneath, and drew the chair towards him after the old fashion. Dropping into it, he planted his elbows on his knees, took his head between his hard knotted hands, and set to studying the fireless grate before him.

"That means mischief," said Mrs. Ricksworth; "you've been putting the devil's thoughts into his head, Sir."

"What's that to me?"

"And he's half a madman, and always has been. You're a fine gentleman mayhap, but you're a bad un, Sir."

"That's my character," Thirsk said, defiantly; "I am a bad one, Mrs. Ricksworth. You're only of the same opinion as the world."

"Ye were talking of your wrongs jist now," said a sharp voice, and the figure in the corner spoke for the first time.

"Don't you think I have any, Ipps?"

"Do ye ever think of moine, Measter Thirsk?" he said, suddenly coming from the corner in which he had been so long located; "ha' ye ever a thought for others' troobles beside those brought on ye by your own gallows wickedness? Ain't I a roight to talk of wrongs, do ye think, ye cursed coward, who brought me doon to ruin?"

Thirsk recoiled. The passion of this feeble, tottering man was unlooked for, and the man spoke with a rapidity and force for which everyone there was unprepared. Mrs. Ricksworth dropped her needle, and her husband revolved slowly on his chair, and stared at the speaker.

"I'll have my say out now, Measter Thirsk. God's sent

me the chance, and it's the last one for an ould mon loike me, and I'm not afeared o' ye. I wor honest all my loife before I knew ye—light-hearted for my age, and vain of my sharp wits, too. Ye knew I wor poor, and bribed me with your money ; ye told me a fool's story of your love affairs, and turned me by degrees agin' the honest measter whose farm had been my home for thirty-seven year and more. Ye made me false in my old age!—ye tempted me by promises of a better place, and of a pension when I wor too old for work!—ye told me a score of lies to make a knave of me, and ye succeeded!—I'm a beggar now, and starving! Look at your work, Sir!—aren't ye glad to see it?"

Thirsk's hand wandered to his pocket, but the old man gave a scream of rage that arrested the movement :—

" Hould there!" he shrieked ; " I woan't ha' your money—I woan't in any way or shape be holden to a man I'm going to curse! Ye talk of hate—if ye only knew how I hate ye, and see in ye my ruin. And may ye live to be the ruin that ye've made of me—and may ye'r woife prove false to all her marriage vows—and your child die suddenly—and sickness and disease fall on ye and yourn—and shame and harm never leave ye till your dying day! If it's a curse that cooms true every word, I'll thank my God for't!"

Thirsk could not stand against the torrent of accusation which escaped the old man's lips ; it was the first time in his life that he had been fairly charged with evil, and the evil stood before him in all its haggardness and horror. He saw then, at that moment, where one step from right had led, and he knew whose work it was before him. In the old days he had rejoiced in the tact and judgment that had led this man to betray his master—in the craft that had gained the mastery over Ipps's simple shrewdness. And this was the result, and that old man's poverty and disgrace were his work.

" I never meant you harm," he stammered ; " Neider, let us get out of this. They're all mad together."

No answer was returned. Ipps was struggling for breath ; Ricksworth had faced the grate again, and was still deep in thought ; Mrs. Ricksworth, brought to an idea of duty, was working diligently, and not affected much by the ravings of the half-demented being in the corner.

It was striking eleven when we were in the streets.

“Are you going home, Thirsk?”

“No.”

“I would think over that resolution again.”

“I’ll think no more to-night,” he said, petulantly; “let me shake off the accursed weight that is on my brain for a while.”

“I am silent.”

“You return to Edmonton?”

“Not unless you are tired of my society.”

“Oh! your society will do for once,” he said, with a forced laugh; “keep with me till the morning comes.”

“Yes—and till the better thoughts come with the morning.”

We went back to the hotel, discoursing of topics foreign to that which had brought us there together. He shunned any comment on the past incidents of the night; spoke of the theatres, literature, anything that might offer a change to that subject which had disturbed him. But amidst it all, and amidst his efforts to forget, I was assured the deserted wife kept foremost rank, and would not be talked away—and the shadow of the old man’s curse seemed hanging over him.

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## CHAPTER IV.

### WARNING.

IT was one o’clock when I was in my own room at the hotel; the clocks of two churches in the neighbourhood struck the hour as I extinguished my light, and a noisy guttural time-piece on the stairs boomed it in my ears three minutes behind time. I did not fall asleep directly; the incidents of that day had been varied; I had been an unwilling listener to much family strife; I had seen the rapidity with which Nicholas Thirsk could pass from the

height of joy to the extravagance of hate. I had borne his hard words, for the sake of a chance of reasoning with him when the first paroxysm was over ; I had striven to do my best, and the result, so far as I could see it, was vain and unprofitable. When I fell asleep at last, I was conscious that the wind was blowing vigorously, and rattling my casement ; and the rattle, rattle of the window in the sash mingled with a nightmare kind of dream, wherein all the figures of the day met confusedly, and made my head ache watching them. A distorted, oppressive dream, that we all suffer from at times, and to which I lay there a martyr, with the window rattling amidst it all, and I conscious of the noise it made, and anxious about it in my sleep.

The noise increased so much, that I struggled from dream-land, and sat up in bed to listen, and became aware that some one without was hammering upon the panels of the door.

“Who’s there ? ” I cried.

“The night-porter, Sir.”

“What is it ? —what do you want ? ”

“If you please is your name Snider, or Spider, Sir ? ”

“Neider—do you mean ? ”

“That’s it, Sir. A young gentleman from a farm ? ”

“Well—well.”

“Some one wants to see you below, Sir. He says it’s a matter of life and death, and you must come down.”

“What name ? ”

“He didn’t give a name. He’s an old ragged man, Sir.”

“I’ll be down in a minute.”

My first thought was of danger at home ; my second suggested Ipps as the messenger who had called at so unseasonable an hour. In any case, there was danger abroad, to bring a message at that time, and I dressed hastily in the dark. Such nights of sudden waking leave ever a vivid impression on those waked—every minor incident of the next few minutes remains with me to this day. I remember groping for a box of wax lights I had seen on the dressing-table, and knocking over a little toilet bottle that was there, and finding everything *but* the lucifers. Distinctly visible still is that shadowy room, with the blurred light behind the window-blind, and the reflection of a street-lamp cast on

the ceiling, and the outline of my coat hanging behind the door. And amidst it all, as in my dreams, is the rattle, rattle of that disjointed window, and the fitful gusts of the angry wind without.

I went down stairs into the hall, where the lamp was shimmering, the night-porter coiled in a capacious leatheren chair, and Ipps on the hall-mat, twisting his hat round in his hands.

“ Well, Ipps, what is it ? ”

“ Coom into the street, Sir—I’d rather not talk here.”

The porter rose, opened the door, and closed it behind us, as we went down the steps into the deserted streets. The clocks struck two as I descended. I fancied until then that I had slept half the night through.

“ If ye value human loife, ye’ll be stirring now, Sir. Peter Ricksworth’s gone down to Welsdon in the Woods.”

“ What ? —already ? ”

“ You may well say already, Sir. So it be.”

“ How do you know this ? ”

“ He went out soon after ye, Sir—when his woife had gone to take them flannel things home to the outfitter’s, and I pretended sleep till he wor gone, and then went out and watched him. He had been very thoughtful after ye left, and, ould as I was, I guessed his thoughts. I ain’t lost all my wits yet,” he said, a little conceitedly.

“ Go on—go on.”

“ He went to a public-house he knows aboot here—a rare gang of thieves meet there, I can tell ye, and he’s one of ‘em—and he borrowed money on some excuse or other that satisfied the landlord, for it was passed to him across the bar—a shilling and some ha’pence. That and your crown paid the fare to Welsdon in the Woods by the late train that started at midnight. I heard him ask for a ticket to Welsdon, and I saw him get into the train.”

“ Why didn’t you come at once to me ? ”

“ I ha’ been hanging aboot this place ever since—I ha’ been watching ye and that man who’s been my ruin, through the wire-blind of the room where ye were sitting—the room next to the street-door. I worn’t going to tell ye before one who’s in the plot.”

“ What do you mean, Ipps ? ”

"He's offered a thousand pounds for the loife of a man, and Peter Ricksworth's gone to take it!"

"Ipps, you are crazy."

"Didn't I hear him—didn't you hear him?"

"It was bravado—the incoherency of passion—there was no harm intended."

"There will be harm doon—mark my words."

"This is madness!" I exclaimed.

"I doan't care what it be—mad or not mad, it worn't difficult to guess Ricksworth's meaning, or read all that he was thinking aboot in his eyes. He's a pal now, and I wouldn't ha' turned agin' him, only he meant such awful mischief!"

"And he has gone to Welsdon by the last train?"

"I saw him with my own eyes," said Ipps; "and ye'll ha' to be quick, for he's a man that doan't lose easily a chance. He builds on a thousand poonds from the fortune that would coom to Thirsk, and he coonts on payment. There'll be something awful happen—soide by soide with the chance of being rich is the long grudge owing to Sir Richard. He's as full of hate as the man ye were with two or three hours agoo; it's all marked out and built up in both their brains, however much ye may think to blind me by laughing at my nervousness."

"I'm not laughing."

"You see they both meant it now?" he said eagerly.

"No, no."

"Do you tell me he didn't mean it too?" pointing to the hotel; "or that he'd care much for a loife that stood between him and his riches? You doan't know your friend so well as I do, arter all."

"You are mistaken in him, Ipps."

"Ha' your own way, Sir," said the man, contemptuously; "only doan't say I've coom here for nothing."

"Let me think this over."

"Sartinly."

He walked on by my side, turned and retraced his steps with me, while I tried to frame into some degree of consistency the startling information brought me by this man. I thought over the meeting at Ricksworth's house—the strange intensity of hate with which Thirsk had spoken in

his excitement, and the effect it might have on the benighted mind of the ruffian who had defied the law for many years, and was easily tempted, daring and vindictive. He might possibly have thought that Thirsk would give the thousand pounds for the tidings of the baronet's death, sketched some hasty scheme of crime out, and departed to carry out that scheme with all the craftiness with which his low mind was capable. There was a wild improbability about it all—a leaf from a romance of crime and human malice—but it was just possible ! The wife had spoken of the devil's thoughts besetting him ; and the strange fit of brooding into which Ricksworth had fallen had begun before our departure from his wretched home.

It was not a long journey to Welsdon in the Woods ; I could proceed there by the first train. It was not probable that the opportunity to work mischief would present itself immediately on the arrival of Ricksworth in his native village, presupposing that he were even actuated by the motives with which Ipps charged him. Telegraphing to Welsdon seemed a little too hasty, even had there been telegraph clerks up all night at country stations, which there never has been. There was no proof that any harm was intended ; in my own opinion, I doubted Ipps's suspicions ; whilst to place Ricksworth under arrest, or set a watch upon him, was neither fair nor just. In my own experience, it had not been the first time that Peter Ricksworth had unceremoniously quitted his home, and left his wife to the tender mercies of the parish, or to the strength of her own resources to keep her from the union ; in a former case he had abandoned her, under similar circumstances, when the daughter for whom he appeared to have some affection was absent from her home. It was more likely that the five-shilling piece which Thirsk had given him had suggested the means of reaching Welsdon with a trifling loan ; and having been fortunate enough to obtain that loan, he had started off at once. Still, I would go to Welsdon by the next train. I assured Ipps of my intention.

“ I ain't so bad as to let this go on, bad as *he's* made me,” grumbled the old man ; “ p'raps this'll be a kind of a set-off agin' my ould tricks, if ye're the means of stopping this, or putting Sir Richard on his guard.”

" Still, Ipps, I think you are over-suspicious."

" You don't know Peter as well as I do. He be half a brute and half a madman, his woife says, and she knows all aboot him."

" Does she know of this ? "

" Not yet."

" Have you anything more to tell me ? "

" Nothing—save that I haven't a penny in the world, and haven't tasted food for twenty hours. They let me coom in out of the wet and cold now and then, when they're good-tempered, but devil a bit of anything to eat I get, even when they have it to spare, unless the gal's at home."

I gave him some money, for which he thanked me. He walked by my side to the door of the hotel, and then touched my arm again with his nervous hand.

" Ye will remember that there's loife at stake ? " he said.

" I will do my best to avert all harm, if harm be intended."

" Ye doan't believe me ? "

" Not yet."

" Ye'll tell that Thirsk ? "

" I'll act for the best."

" Good-night, and thank'ee for the money. I say."

" Well ? "

" What did *he* think of my curse ? warn't it all hot enough, and scorching—and woan't it fall on him, if he lives long enough ? " he said, maliciously.

" I hope not."

" He deserves it all ! "

And with this unfriendly remark, the man who had been so solicitous concerning human life, shuffled away and left me to proceed to Thirsk's room adjoining mine.

Previous to repairing there, I set the porter to find me a Bradshaw's Guide, which, having been procured, I studied under the hall lamp, until I had ascertained that a train as early as 5.30 A.M. left Euston Square for Welsdon.

I could afford to give Thirsk two hours more sleep before disturbing him, and I went back to my room, and flung myself on the bed, to await the time for further action. I had left word with the porter to call me at four, if, by chance, I should drop off to sleep again ; but the news had

been too startling to afford me much composure—and to lie there brooding on it, seemed gradually, but powerfully, to lead me to Ipps's way of thinking.

I tried to shake it off with all my power. I went over and over again my old train of reasoning, that rendered Ricksworth's departure natural; but the doubts gathered strength, and before four o'clock I was impatient to be gone.

I had a difficulty in rousing Thirsk, whose dark countenance finally glowered at me from his half-open door.

“What's the matter with you, you sleep robber?” he cried; “have you stolen some of my past restlessness?”

“I am going now.”

“The deuce you are! Well, you might have left your adieux in a note. Come in.”

To my surprise he was completely dressed.

“Haven't you been to bed, Thirsk?”

“I fell asleep thinking about it. Don't look alarmed—that's an old habit of mine.”

“I am going to Welsdon in the Woods.”

“You?”

“Yes—to see after Peter Ricksworth, who left by the last train yesternight.”

“Ha!—who told you this?”

“Ipps knocked me up at two in the morning with the news.”

Thirsk looked uneasy. He ran his fingers once or twice through his tangled black hair, and kept his eyes directed upon me. Ipps's suspicion had evidently suggested itself to him, though his effort, like my own, was to think it down.

“Being knocked up makes a man nervous,” said he, with a forced laugh; “what had Ipps to say?”

I told him, and he listened for once with a strange amount of attention.

“It is odd!” he muttered; “I don't see the way clear. If it had been any one but Ricksworth, I could laugh at it more. Of course it's all folly!”

“Will you come to Welsdon with me?”

“Not I. Say the worst happens, what then?”

“Thirsk, you don't wish it to happen. If you say as much, I will never call you friend again.”

“What a calamity!” he said, ironically.

“Do you wish it?”

“Well, not in quite so unceremonious a fashion, Neider; and if it be intended—which, the more I think of—or the more I wake up, the more I doubt, why, you’ll be doing a good turn by warning Sir Richard, or keeping an eye on Peter Ricksworth. Besides, you serve me as well.”

“In what manner?”

“You can bring my boy back, or see that Mercy leaves with the boy at once. I’ll write you a line to Sir Richard—your commission!”

“It’s a commission I don’t care to accept.”

“Mr. and Mrs. Thirsk will remain at daggers drawn until that boy’s return. The child is the peacemaker.”

“Write your note, Thirsk.”

There were writing materials on the dressing-table where the night-light burned, and he had been writing before sleep had stolen on him. He sat down before the table and dashed off a few hasty lines; and I, waiting and watching, could see how the brow contracted as he wrote. In a very little while the letter was sealed and in my hand.

“This by a trusty messenger—as the ancient letter-writers used to say,” he said.

“I hope that you have been civil, at least, Thirsk?” said I, doubtfully.

“Don’t be alarmed,” was the evasive answer; “and, secondly, don’t lose your train.”

“Thirsk, you are anxious I should be gone,” I said.

“If you did not scent danger yourself, would *you* go?” he retorted.

“I hardly believe in danger.”

“Nor I—only, once upon a time, in the wild days of my youth, when I was a fool to my interest, I promised Ricksworth five pounds, or rather hinted at five pounds for a service required, and he earned it.”

“Thirsk, there *is* danger!”

“I have made up my mind *not* to believe it. Good-bye. I shall remain at this hotel until I hear from you.”

He shook me by the hand before I left him. When we met again there were many changes.

## CHAPTER V

“MY LADY’S CHAMBER.”

I HAD half an hour to wait at the railway station. It was a fine bright morning, with the wind, that had kept me wakeful and disturbed my dreams, blowing from the north-east. A luggage train that had been travelling all night having just arrived, I had a perfect consciousness of being very much in the way. After consulting the time-table, to make sure that 5.30 was the correct time, and wandering round the ticket holes—all closed, and breathing no sign of business—I went into the waiting-room, which a sleepy guard was sweeping out.

I wrote off a letter to my mother, telling her that sudden business had called me to Welsdon in the Woods, and desiring her and Grey not to be anxious concerning me. It was an epistle that occupied ten minutes, at the end of which time one or two early travellers strolled into the waiting-room. Another five minutes woke up the officials, brought the passenger train backing into the station, piled the first instalment of luggage on the platform, opened the ticket holes, and filled the terminus with people. Having posted my letter, and procured my ticket, I took my seat in the railway carriage, with a strange uneasiness that I had been dilatory in my movements, and that much valuable time was lost to me. All the old reasons that warned me of precipitation, and acting on my own responsibility, appeared weak at that time, and I was feverishly impatient for the train’s departure. I sat by the open door, glancing up at the clock until 5.30 was registered on the dial. I beat uneasily on the floor with my feet as one minute, then another, stole on, and the guards only slammed doors, and opened them again, and luggage and late passengers were still upon the platform.

The train was only four minutes late, but it seemed an age to me before the whistle sounded, and we began to glide away from the eternal book-stall, the staring clock, and the army

of railway guards waiting for further trains. I was travelling second class, and there faced me a garrulous old gentleman, whose talk of the politics of the day—of Palmerston *v.* Derby, of Gladstone *v.* Disraeli—brought others besides myself to the verge of desperation. In my own excited condition I could have strangled him for his wearisome platitudes ; for his deliberate appropriation of old newspaper articles that I had read, and which he delivered as ideas of his own, conceived that very instant in the heat of debate.

I was glad when my courteous neighbour offered me the "Punch" for the week, although its caricatures and pleasant sarcasms jarred upon me, and had no meaning. I remember reading one paragraph half-a-dozen times, knowing little of its purport, and trying to guess at it in an imbecile kind of way, that irritated me. Every mile nearer my journey's end I became more excited, even more convinced that it was an errand of life and death on which I was speeding.

I was on a special errand, the result of Ipps's fears and suspicions ; and once fairly launched on that mission, the whole story shaped itself differently to that which I had endeavoured to frame some hours before. *My* reasons for Ricksworth's sudden departure were probable then, and avarice and malice seemed the only incentives that could have urged Mercy's father to act precipitately. If I had telegraphed down the line before my departure that morning—if I had, at least, put Sir Richard Freemantle on his guard, and not have had such confidence in my own shallow judgment. It had been my reigning fault through life, that self-conviction—and I accused myself of want of energy in not making an effort to counteract the evil which Peter Ricksworth had in view.

When I sprang on the platform of Welsdon station I looked eagerly from one to another, as if to learn from the strange faces near me, whether there were any stirring news at Welsdon. But they were phlegmatic, every-day faces round me ; the porter lounged to and fro, after the usual fashion of porters at small stations—the man who took my ticket was winking at a brazen-faced hussy in the rear—the man on the box of the fly that plied for hire was flipping the ears of his bony quadruped with his whip—country boys were lounging about, and looking through the fence which

separated the high road from the line—there was no excitement at Welsdon in the Woods.

“Fly, your honour?”

I climbed to the driver’s side, a little to his amazement.

“Drive to the Hall.”

The man touched his hat, and then flipped more briskly at his horse, which went off at the jumping, jostling rate of progression peculiar to fly-horses in general.

My driver was a man whom I remembered as an ostler at the “Haycock Inn,” and a glance or two askance from his left eye assured me that he had recognised an old farm-pupil of Mr. Genny’s.

“You’re from the ‘Haycock?’”

“Yes, Sir.”

“I suppose you remember me?”

“Never forgets, Sir.”

“Times have changed since I was here last.”

“They have, Sir—all along of the Tramlingford smash, you see.”

“Any news?”

“No, Sir. Things just as usual.”

This was a relief to me—ten years must have been taken off my looks, the man stared so.

“I think you meet every train that comes in?”

“That’s my dooty, Sir. It’s a poor spec, but missus likes the idea, and p’r’aps it keeps off opposition.”

“Were you here last night?”

“O’ course, Sir.”

“Any friends up by the last train? Old friends of Mr. Genny, or old acquaintances of yours?”

“No, Sir—not that I remembers.”

“Not Peter Ricksworth?”

“Oh!—oh!—old Peter, well, to be sure, now you speak of it, he *did* turn up, for I caught a sight of him coming out o’ the station. That’s curious that you should think of him, Sir.”

“I want him—where is he?”

“I can’t say. It’s more curious like he hasn’t been to the ‘Haycock’ this morning, or that I ain’t seen him about the village. Now I think of it, it’s odd nobody’s seen him.”

"How do you know he has not been seen?"

"Oh! they'd soon talk of Peter coming back. We were uncommon thankful when he went to London—he was such a spiteful, artful, disagreeable customer."

"Stop at the 'Haycock' as you pass through the village."

"All right, Sir."

At the "Haycock" I alighted, made further inquiries of the landlady, and some men lounging at the bar, and learned that nothing had been heard of Ricksworth. Had it not been for the further testimony of the driver—who was snapped at by the landlady for not mentioning it before—my statement that Ricksworth had arrived at Welsdon would have been totally discredited.

"Oh! dear," sighed the landlady, "I wonder if he thinks of stopping here. Jane," to her daughter, "take the new pewter pots out of the tap-room, and put the china ones back, or he'll come in quarrelsome, and kill somebody."

No particulars of Ricksworth in the village, and his sudden disappearance keeping alive my doubts of his intentions, I entered the fly, to deliberate on some careful plan of action. I could think better inside the vehicle, and the driver could not trouble me with his loquacity.

We rattled on to the Hall, along the well-known road where Harriet and I had walked together more than once, and where my love once leaped to my lips and startled her; past the stile and the winding footpath across the meadow that led to the old church; along the curve by the wood side and shadowed by the overhanging trees, amidst which a man could hide and bide a time for his revenge, I thought. Then the old farm, let to another tenant, with strange faces at the door, and strange workers in the fields, but looking so like home, that my heart yearned to the place, and tears came suddenly and strangely to my eyes. I began life there—romance began there—all the fevered dreams that ran out and left me in the waking world began there, and, but for one wild snatch at the past, ended there for ever. And dreams will end, and fancies born of folly must die suddenly—I was no worse off than other men! I had grown strong; my life was marked out with my bachelor partner—the world was a matter of profit and loss, good

bargains and fair interest on one's little savings. I was growing old and stout, and there were early lines upon my forehead. My mother had found a grey hair in my head only two days since, and laughed and cried over it—so the globe spins round, and we grow old upon it in a little while.

The Hall at last. The quaint old-fashioned red brick mansion, which had formed, for two hundred years, part of the Welsdon landscape; we drove past the huge iron gates and along the winding drive of that great house I had never thought of visiting till that day.

The lodge-keeper had swung back the gates; to my inquiry through the window of the fly, if Sir Richard were within, he had answered that he thought so—Sir Richard might be wandering about the estate, perhaps, but he had not gone through the entrance-gates that day. I rode before the house, where further information was imparted to me.

“Sir Richard's not in, Sir; will you step in and wait? He will be back by nine o'clock to breakfast.”

“Where has he gone?”

“Over to the ruins, Sir. He's sketching.”

“He's what?”

“Sketching the ruins, Sir, I think.”

“I will go at once. The ruins of the castle, of course, you mean?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Should I be unfortunate enough to miss him, will you present my card and ask him to wait within until my return, if you please?”

“Yes, Sir.”

I was turning away, when a thought occurred to me.

“Sir Richard's little nephew—is he here?”

“Is staying here, Sir, with his maid. They both went across the park half an hour ago. There's a short cut through the park to the ruins, Sir, if you wish to meet Sir Richard. He will be sure to come home that way.”

“Thank you, I will avail myself of your directions.”

I paid the driver of the fly, and dismissed him. The old seneschal—they seemed all of an ancient order, to match the house—came a little way with me across a footpath in the

park, to indicate the short cut to the ruins, leaving meanwhile the oaken door open. There was little fear of thieves at Welsdon in the Woods.

The path seemed easy to follow, but I managed to lose my way, and luckily to strike on it again after five minutes' loss of time. Every little impediment tried my temper and tested my nerves to an incredible degree; the sense of danger was strong upon me, and the consciousness that time was valuable, and on a moment's loss thereof might hang a human life, grew more powerful every instant.

The path through the park, where the deer scudded by me, was circuitous, and seemed to have no end. The impression was gaining upon me that I had lost my way again when I came to the oaken fence that encompassed the Free-mantle estate, and to a small wicket, with the key left in the lock. Passing through I found myself in meadow land, with the old ruins before me on the slope, looking very picturesque, backed by the clear sky and the bright sunshine. There were a myriad of birds twittering amongst the trees around me, the cattle studded the meadows, the hum of insects rose up from the grass whereon the dew hung thickly. God's peace seemed resting over everything; and to think of evil at that time, in that quiet place, and at that hour, was akin to an absurdity.

My way to the ruins lay across the meadow and along the eastern side of the castle to the great entrance. In the walls were gaps and fissures, through which I might have forced a way, but respect for its proprietor within induced me to go round to the gates through which I had passed years ago with William Grey. In that old place time seemed to have stood still; two years more or less to the ivy-covered stonework made no difference here; only to the fresh and new, with the bloom of life's spring upon them, were days and hours of moment.

There was a second old man officiating as custodian of the ruins; Mercy Ricksworth's place had not been filled by one of her own sex. He looked with surprise at my early visit, but admitted me, and pointed to the book rest, and the visitors' book.

"Where is Sir Richard? I wish to speak to him immediately."

"Oh! I didn't know you'd come on business, Sir," he said; "he's in 'My Lady's Chamber' yon——no, Lor' bless me, here he is!"

Sir Richard Freemantle came hastily towards me. He held his hand extended, as if to greet me with an old friend's warmth. His cold hand shook a little in my own, I fancied.

"Have you come from Mr. Thirsk or Agatha?"

"Partly from Mr. Thirsk."

"He knows that his child is here?"

"Yes."

"What does he say?—what does he think now?"

"He is naturally surprised and indignant. The result has been a quarrel between husband and wife."

"Always unfortunate!" said the baronet, with a sigh; "but—but he was engaged to report some races, I understood?"

"He flung the appointment up, on the receipt of some good news from his father."

"And went home?"

"Ycs."

"It is very hard," said Sir Richard, "that one cannot count upon his movements better; that he will be eccentric! And that boy is such a comfort to me, young as he is. I have an artist at the Hall engaged to take his portrait."

"It must remain unfinished, Sir Richard."

"Ah!" with a second sigh, "I feared as much. And the child takes kindly to a stern man like me, and is like the Freemantles, people tell me. There he goes, now. See there!" he cried with an enthusiasm I had never seen exhibited before. "How the little chap can trot!"

The baronet's eyes sparkled behind his glasses, and he gave a sudden flourish of the walking cane in his hand, that narrowly escaped grazing my cheek in his excitement. Thirsk's child, a well-made, sturdy little infant, that could just run alone now, and was proud of the achievement, passed the further end of the ruins, and trotted into the inner square of stonework, known in the old days as "My Lady's Chamber;" at the same moment Mercy Ricksworth darted across the grass in chase of him. The child and the maid were both laughing, and their silvery voices rang pleasantly

amidst the walls which echoed but seldom to any human merriment.

"I'll be with you in one moment, Mr. Neider," said the baronet. And he took a cross cut to the ruins, and ran on with surprising alacrity to intercept his nephew at the other end of the "Lady's Chamber." His blood had warmed since I had seen him last—in the latter days his heart was growing young. I watched him tripping gingerly yet swiftly along, with that burlesque of haste characteristic of methodical gentlemen of his age—for the moment I had forgotten the warning which I had travelled many miles to give him. In the light and sunshine he was safe, and I smiled at my own impulse that had called out his name. As he passed through a jagged archway, and his voice rang out in exultation at having surprised the child, whose little laugh echoed once more in concert, I looked up at the gaping stonework above them, and the old staircase that ended in ruin and rank grass. The story of Grey's recurred to me; the old sense of danger came fresh upon me thinking of it; the passage choked with leaves that led up to that tottering fabric was within a stone's throw, and I ran on to join the group.

I stopped suddenly and gasped for breath—a noise of falling masonry, and then the whole place swam round with me; ivied ruin, earth and sky, blended confusedly, and whirled before me. Was it fancy or truth, or had half the staircase fallen as I gazed, pushed from within by two strong bony hands, that at that distance I could have sworn to?

It was an awful reality, and I cried out with horror. The grass-covered stones at the summit had fallen—there were two steps less jutting from the stonework; there was a cloud of dust from the "Lady's Chamber," a shout from Sir Richard, and then a laboured groaning, as of one suddenly in pain. Breaking the spell that had locked my feet to the earth, I ran on—Mercy and the child had fallen, and there was blood upon the ground. The child was still, and it was Mercy groaning beneath the weight upon her chest, whilst standing paralysed with fear, and wringing his hands like a woman, stood Sir Richard Freemantle unhurt.

"My God! this is an awful accident, Neider. Thank Heaven, you are here to assist!"

"This is no accident, Sir Richard—it is *murder*!"

## CHAPTER VI.

“GOD DISPOSES.”

I HAD uttered the words as I stooped over Mercy Ricksworth, and made an effort to raise the great stone step that had struck her down, and the word “*murder*” was caught up in a key harsh, dissonant and awful, from the ruined staircase whence the fall had come. A moment afterwards, and Peter Ricksworth, with a wild beast’s cry, dropped from the height above, brought more stones crashing down with him, fell, and staggered to his feet, to fall again on his knees before his murdered child.

“Oh ! Mercy, Mercy ! Not you, my girl—not you, of all the world, after all these years ! Man, won’t you help me take the load from her ?” he shrieked.

“See to the child !—call the gate-keeper !—send for assistance at once !” I cried, furious with excitement ; “above all, this villain here must not escape.”

“You may do what you like,” said Ricksworth ; “hang me, burn me, stone me to death here, if you will. Only help the girl now. Oh ! Mercy, dear, don’t you know me ? Oh ! Mercy, bear up for a little while, just to say you forgive the hellish hands that did it !”

We had removed the stone by this time, and Mercy’s head was on her father’s knees ; but the eyes were closed, and no voice responded from those blood-stained lips.

Sir Richard, with the child in his arms, was hurrying across to the gates. I could hear the gate-keeper shouting already to some one across the fields.

“Do you think she’s dead ?” Ricksworth asked, in a husky whisper. “For God’s sake say you don’t think that, Sir !”

“I think that you have killed her, madman—that death, at least, must follow this.”

“Run for help !”

He was trembling like a child ; his face was whiter than his daughter’s, and its contrast with the tangled black hair, and the restless, fiery, black eyes, was an awful sight to witness. I had no fear that he would attempt

to escape, and I ran at my utmost speed towards the gates.

“Take some water down there,” I cried to the old gate-keeper, “and bathe Mercy Ricksworth’s temples. I am going to the village.”

Three men came running in at the same time, and I motioned them towards the ruins, gasping forth,

“Ricksworth must not escape. See to it !”

I had no faith in any one’s speed save my own, and I set off down the road to Welsdon. One of the men began shouting after me, and I paused and let him run towards me, stamping with impatience till he reached me.

“Are you going for a doctor, Sir ?”

“Ye—yes. What is it ?”

“Sir Richard has already sent for Dr. Ellis in the village—John has gone on horseback. He and his assistant will be on their way back before you reach them, Sir.”

I could see Sir Richard, still clasping the child to his breast, passing through the oak fence into the park ; there was another servant with him, who kept glancing from the child to Sir Richard’s face, and talking eagerly. The child was in good hands, assistance had been sent for, and would speedily arrive ; my duty was to return and afford all the assistance in my power, till better help arrived. And what an age it seemed in coming, with the figure so still, the group of watchers standing there, and the haggard, awful face of Peter Ricksworth looking into his child’s, taking a shade more of horror in its expression, with every moment that passed on and brought no help, and gave no hopeful words. The men standing by him offered their suggestions once or twice, but he glanced furtively at them from beneath his shaggy eyebrows, and growled at them in reply. He was stricken down like his child, and almost as helpless ; once he gave vent to such a short, unearthly laugh, followed by a choking cry, that the men went back a step, and looked from one to the other with a scared expression.

The news began to spread, after the rule of evil news in general, and more strange faces to appear about the ruins. Relief was an age in coming, but it came at last ; the carriage of Dr. Ellis stopped before the ruins, and his assistant leaped out at the same time as two of the police

from the Welsdon station—the whole force located in that quiet village—entered with a mob of boys and girls and village idlers.

“Where is Dr. Ellis?”

“Gone to the Hall,” said the assistant, a middle-aged man, who bore a reputation for skill in Welsdon. “Where is the girl? Some of you men make a litter as quickly as possible, there’s good fellows. Cut away at the park trees, or anything in your way.”

He was looking intently into the white face of Ricksworth’s daughter; I could see his own face shadow very much as he surveyed her. There was no hope for her upon it.

Ricksworth, who had been watching him as intently as myself, gasped forth—

“She’s not dead?—she’ll get better?”

“I can’t say yet. Is the litter ready? Here, you men!”

“But you must say! you shall say! I’m her father, man, and can’t wait while you keep the truth back. Say there’s a chance of life! Oh! if you’ll only say that, Sir, I doan’t care!”

“When we get to the Hall——”

“You’re a damned two-faced scoundrel. There’s death in your face!” yelled Ricksworth.

“You are doing that girl more harm than good by shaking her head.”

Ricksworth became motionless as a statue, till a white-gloved hand rested on his shoulder.

“Peter Ricksworth, you’re my prisoner.”

“What for?”

“Attempted murder.”

“You woan’t take me away now? Oh! my God, doan’t say you’ll take me away now!”

“It’s a long way to the county gaol. The lock-up never did for Peter Ricksworth,” remarked the man.

“This is my child. Do you know that?”

“Yes.”

“And I’m to leave her like this?”

“I don’t see any help for it, myself.”

“There’ll be a hard fight for it, then, and murder done,” he said.

"What! aren't you satisfied with murdering your own child?" cried the official, roughly.

The accusation struck home, and the man groaned heavily, and called down God's curses on his head, and prayed to be struck dead kneeling by his daughter's side. In the midst of much vehemence he mingled much of blasphemous adjuration, and paled the faces of his listeners. When the litter was brought a stormy scene ensued, for Ricksworth would help to place his daughter there, and the law was stern, and in a hurry to be gone with its prisoner.

"Let him," said the assistant sharply. "It's the last time."

"Ha!" yelled Ricksworth, "she'll die, then! You know she'll die!"

"It is impossible to save her."

The assistant had gathered the truth of the story from the scraps of information floating round him, and was not half so particular concerning the feelings of his principal auditor. And the awful change that came over Ricksworth told of a retributive justice, and an agony of remorse impossible for man to estimate. He flung himself upon the ground beside the litter, and cried, and moaned, and raved; he struggled with his captors to release himself, and when the litter was raised and borne across the open green space, where the ancient font stood, it required the assistance of Sir Richard's servants and gamekeepers to retain him prisoner.

"This'll be tough work to get him to Tramlingford," said the policeman, panting. "Are the handcuffs ready, Joe?"

"All right."

"Let me go! Woan't you just let me say good-bye to her?" he groaned. "Don't you hear I'm never to see her agin, and she's the only one who ever cared for me more than a dog. I must see her!"

"Will you promise to come quietly, then?"

"Yes—so help my God!"

The litter was stopped, and the guilty man raised his handcuffed hands, and prayed again to be struck dead at her side; in his excitement he would have flung himself upon her, if those who were watchful of him had not closed upon him.

He forgot his promise to his captors, as he had forgotten through life all his promises to be honest, sober, a good father and husband, and was torn away struggling for liberty, and uttering the old curses on himself, and on those who kept him from his daughter's side.

His awful cries were ringing in my ears when he was miles on his road to Tramlingford. All the day I heard them like a horrible refrain to the tragedy that had occurred ; in the night I sat up in bed wherein I had fought hard for sleep and failed, and fancied that it could not be delusion which brought them so plainly to my startled senses. Outside in the dark passages beyond, they *must* be ringing still !

But before that time the worst was known—the worst, or the best.



## CHAPTER VII.

### MERCY.

WE found Sir Richard on the steps of the Hall, awaiting our arrival.

“ Is she dead ? ” were his first words to me.

“ Not yet—the assistant gives no hope.”

“ I have sent a messenger to telegraph to Agatha and her husband, and to a London physician, in whom I have great confidence.”

“ The boy—he is not killed, I hope ? ” I asked.

The tears sprung to the eyes of the baronet, and it was a struggle with his voice to answer me at all.

“ Doctor Ellis speaks like his assistant.”

“ No hope ? ”

“ He says so. But I won’t think it—I can’t believe it ! ” cried the baronet ; “ only one stone grazed him in the descent. Only one, Mr. Neider, and poor Mercy was buried

underneath. What could have been the intention of all this ? was it my life that was aimed at by that villain ? ”

I did not answer. For the present the grim truths around us were sufficient, and there was much to do.

“ I must go to the railway station,” I said.

“ Don’t leave me, Mr. Neider,” implored the baronet ; “ you will not leave the Hall yet awhile, whilst all this uncertainty hovers near us. Your stay here is almost imperative, and it would be a great favour—a great kindness.”

“ I am going to telegraph to Mr. Thirsk—he is not with his wife. A temporary separation ensued on his learning the news that—”

“ Yes—yes—I know,” he interrupted ; “ spare me now ! Every word is an accusation—I have acted very wrongly God forgive me ! Will you write the messages you wish to send by telegraph, and some one shall ride over with them at once. There is—there is Mercy’s mother, too.”

“ I have not forgotten her. I am trying to remember the name of the street.”

But in the disturbed condition of my mind I could not think of it, and in my message to Thirsk I told the whole news, and begged him to apprise the mother, and send money for her passage down to Welsdon. I telegraphed also to Harriet Genny—she had been Mercy’s friend, and longed so much for Mercy’s friendship once. Then there was nothing left but to sit down with the baronet in the great room, where the untasted breakfast was spread out, and wait as patiently as possible for news. There was a maid-servant acting as nurse to each of the sufferers, and all admittance had been denied, for a time, to any one, save the doctors, so we sat about the room, or paced its limits silently. We were both too full of thought and suspense to talk of all that had happened that memorable day. It seemed hours ago since the catastrophe already, and yet scarce three quarters of an hour had passed since the baronet and I shook hands in the castle ruins.

Sir Richard was feverishly impatient, and nervously alive to the footsteps of the menials passing without in

the broad corridors. He went to the door and asked the servants if there were any fresh news; or if they had heard of any since he had come down stairs; if Doctor Ellis were still there; if the servants had started with my messages, and a hundred questions unnecessary and superfluous. Then he would come back, and wander about the room again.

"Mr. Neider," he said, suddenly, "you started early from London. I am strangely forgetful of my duties as host. You have not breakfasted?"

"I can touch nothing yet, Sir Richard."

He did not press me, but began his old perambulations. After a quarter of an hour's silence, he said,

"Agatha should be here by twelve, or one o'clock, at latest. I told her to spare no expense, and to hire a special train, if necessary. Great Heavens!" cried he, changing to the colour of the breakfast cloth, "if the boy should die before she reaches here!"

The thought was too much for him to bear in that room. He rushed away to seek Doctor Ellis, in defiance of the recent prohibition. Presently the doctor and the baronet entered the room together.

"We can do nothing till the child is conscious," said the doctor; "the stupor is a bad sign, and he may pass away in it. The child is young, and has no strength. The blow has been a heavy one."

I made inquiry concerning Mercy Ricksworth—in the concern for him whom Sir Richard Freemantle considered his heir, and took such intense interest in as his sister's child, the poor girl, who had been struck down with him, seemed likely to be forgotten.

"Of course there is no hope for her," the doctor said, in rather a matter-of-fact, business-sort of way; "she is sinking fast."

"Sinking!" I cried; "how long has she to live, then?"

"An hour, at the utmost."

"Is she conscious?"

"We have just brought her round—she is anxious to know how it all happened, but I think she may be spared that."

"Thank you, Sir—that is a merciful consideration," I said.

"Do you know her?—you—you are not a friend of hers?" the doctor asked eagerly.

"I know her well—I am her friend," I ventured to say.

"She's been asking to see her friends," said the doctor; "regretting that they were all away from her at this time. I have just come with a message to Sir Richard—she wishes to see you very much, Sir."

As Sir Richard was leaving the room, I said,

"Will you tell her I am here. She will remember me, I think."

Sir Richard seemed hardly to have departed, before he returned to the room.

"She will see you instead, in a few moments; when she has rallied a little she will send for you. This is all very awful!" he muttered, sinking into a chair, and rocking himself slowly to and fro, as though in pain.

I stood by the bay-window, looking into the spacious garden that stretched beyond, and waited for my summons. There was a gilt timepiece on the mantelshelf, and it chimed the quarter, and half-hour, without a message from the dying girl. I was thinking of renewing my inquiries concerning her, when Doctor Ellis's assistant opened the door, looked round and beckoned to me. I followed him, and went along the spacious corridors, the stone floor spread with strips of deer-skin, to a room at the extremity of the building, that had been hastily turned into a bed-room, to prevent the carrying of the poor girl up stairs. Formerly it had been a small study, or store-room for the antiquities that Sir Richard Freemantle had collected, and the glass cases that faced me were full of fossils and strata of earth—significant of that hard study of past ages, which had turned his thoughts and heart too much from the life around him, and his duties in it.

The impromptu nurse moved away from the bedside as I advanced towards it, and the assistant felt Mercy's pulse again as she turned her dark eyes in my direction, and smiled faintly and wearily at me.

"I thought that I was quite alone, Mr. Neider," she said

in a low voice, and speaking with great difficulty ; "God sends me one I can—trust, I think."

"You may rely upon my assistance, Mercy," I responded ; "on my friendship. This is a very hard and sudden fate to come upon us all."

"Do you think that I am afraid to die ?" she said, calmly.

"I hope not—I think not."

"I have thought—of death—more than once, as the best that could befall me in a world where I have been a little—just a little—misunderstood. I don't—complain!"

She struggled a little with her breath, and put a handkerchief to her lips a moment. The assistant watched her anxiously.

"You need not be afraid, Sir," she said to him.

"You will not excite yourself?"

"Does it matter much ?" she asked.

After a moment's pause she motioned me to take the seat by her bedside, and *looked* the assistant to a distance—out of hearing, in the shadow of the room where the nurse sat glancing at us both. Then she lay struggling with her breath again, and with her life, the sands of which ran on so swiftly to the end !

"Accidents such as these," she whispered, "must fall here and there. Better on me than others. The boy will die, they tell me."

"I hope not—I am not sure."

"God bless him !" she murmured, and was silent again.

They were long, anxious pauses, which deprived me of my breath, and brought each time the doctor to the bedside to watch, feel her pulse, and then steal back again. The silence between each whispering grew longer every instant, and presaged the eternal stillness coming on.

"I should have liked mother here—poor father—Harriet—Mrs. Agatha. Dear Agatha !" she added, "if my dying, even her boy's could make—her life—more happy now !"

"God may will it so, Mercy."

"You are a good young man—thank you for that hope."

A long pause, and then her voice more weak and afar off.

“Strange to have you here at the last, and—only you ! Mr. Neider,” in a more excited whisper, “you will remember me to the one—true—friend *you* have.”

“William Grey ? ”

The quivering of her eyelids betokened that I comprehended her.

“Tell him—tell him,” she said, after another long silence, “that I—I *have loved him through it all !*—I wish him to know that, for my own sake, lest he should think I never knew—the worth of his true heart. But I loved him too well—too well,” she repeated, “to let him marry me, *and mine*. Mr. Neider, you will not forget *this* ! ”

“Never ! ”

“You are crying ! ” she exclaimed, in wonderment.

“Pardon me—but I have misunderstood you too. I see all now—your generosity—your nobleness ! ”

“My common prudence,” she whispered, and then closed her eyes once more.

It was so long before she recovered that I glanced towards the assistant to learn if there were any hopes that she would speak again. For a time he seemed in doubt, but she rallied suddenly, and turned at once to the place where she had seen me last.

“It has been an up-hill life,” she said; “God mercifully—shortens it ! Tell Mr. Thirsk I thought of him—make him and Agatha better friends, Sir, if you can.”

“I will do my best.”

“Tell mother—I am sorry she was not here to say good-bye to me. Tell father—that I—hoped—he would think of me, and try to—try to—live a better—life, for the sake of—her he loved a little ! And oh ! Sir, if, when I am gone, you could find a place—for mother in your farm, if he *should*—keep on going wrong, in spite of me ! ”

“I will not forget her, Mercy.”

“And—and Harriet—I am sorry she is not here. Her life has been—not unlike my own. If you would try to—”

“To what ? ” I asked eagerly.

There was a hard struggle not to subside into the old death-like stupor. It was the sudden rallying at the last, and the earnest nature seemed to conquer, even then, her weakness.

“To make her happy—she who has thought—of you so long !”

“No—no !”

“I have seen it—read it all—it is the truth, Sir. Bid her good-bye for me, and do your best for all—of us! *Think of—*”

Another long pause—the doctor, stealing to her side, even the nurse coming with him, all hushed attention and subdued alarm.

“Will she speak again ?” I asked.

Looking at her calm and still then, with the grey light on her face, which had changed so suddenly, I could but doubt it, though I waited for the answer of one more skilled than I.

“Never in this world, Sir—she is dead.”

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## CHAPTER VIII.

### HUSBAND AND WIFE.

LATER in the day the house was full of guests. The messages from Welsdon had flashed along the wires, troubling many hearts—and Agatha, and Harriet, Mercy’s mother, William Grey, Sir Richard’s physician, and Thirsk, were all beneath the roof of Sir Richard Freemantle. A strange assembly of guests, that only a strange incident or accident—such as had happened here—could have brought together at one time.

Concerning William Grey, I need say but little ; but that I took him aside in the early afternoon, and told the story of poor Mercy’s death, and her long love for him. That he was moved and childlike in his sorrow, the reader may

imagine—his was a child's heart, not difficult to move at any time.

He went into the room, took his silent leave, and his last look at her, and went away without a word. I believe that he was a better Christian, and a less worldly man from that day.

I was the first to meet Nicholas Thirsk, who was the last to arrive at the Hall. I had been on the watch for him an hour at the lodge gates when he came along the country road. He was advancing swiftly, with his face bent downwards, and with the old sternness that nothing would soften on his features. Until he was close upon me, he did not know that I had been watching for him.

“How's the boy?” was his first inquiry.

“About the same—no better or no worse.”

“Conscious?”

“No.”

I saw his hands clench suddenly, and then relax again.

“And my wife—has she come?”

“She has been here some hours.”

“Now the story?”

Proceeding up the carriage drive, towards the Hall, I told the story to him; and he listened patiently, and betrayed only his suppressed excitement by the closing and opening of his hands. When I had concluded, his foot was on the broad steps that led up to the door.

“Here at last!” he said.

I fancied the old mocking fire was in his eyes again, as he turned to me; that, amidst the trouble that had fallen on him, his own fancied wrongs were still uppermost and unatoned for. He roused my scorn and hatred of his imaginary inquiries, and I cried—

“If you come here in the mood I left you yesternight, go back! If you have no sorrow for all the evil you have caused, and are but here to add to it, you had better turn away! No one will miss you, no one here will care for your extravagance in the real affliction there is to mourn for in this house.”

He stood with his foot on the lower step, still watching me; my outburst did not affect him as it might have done in the days we both had left behind. Astonishment, rage,

even the old sneer at my indignation, were absent at that time. He looked almost sorrowfully at me.

“ Neider,” he said, “ don’t think me quite a devil. I am troubled, ill at ease, and there is much that sits heavily on my conscience. The knowledge that I am the murderer of my boy is enough to weigh me down at present—don’t you think so ? ”

“ Forgive me—I thought that you came in an ill spirit.”

“ No,” he answered ; “ and now give me the letter that I wrote to Sir Richard. It is with you still ? ”

“ Yes.”

He went slowly and thoughtfully into the house, tearing the letter to pieces as he walked. Outside the drawing-room door Sir Richard Freemantle met him. The two men who had been so long apart—who had both, perhaps, so long misunderstood each other—were face to face at last. It was a painful meeting for them both.

“ I am glad you have come,” murmured the baronet ; “ your wife is up stairs.”

“ Shall I go up now ? ” he answered.

“ I had better prepare her—she is very weak, but—but she will not leave the boy.”

“ Who is this ? ” asked Thirsk, as a short, spare man came down the stairs.

“ My own physician, Dr. Barford.”

“ Has the child a chance of life, Sir ? ” asked Thirsk.

“ My dear Sir, it is impossible to say at present. Whilst there is life, there is hope.”

“ Ah ! I know what that means.”

And Thirsk turned away. The baronet caught the physician by the arm.

“ A thousand pounds when he is out of danger, Doctor.”

“ Oh ! my dear Sir, I shan’t want bribing in the good cause.”

Thirsk looked at me ; it was a strange remark of Sir Richard’s, and it was so vivid a contrast to the offer of as large a sum made yesternight, that he shrunk back in dismay.

“ Have you told him ? ” he said, when we were together in the desert of a drawing-room.

"No—it was a folly of yours—a madness, and meant nothing."

"See what it has brought on me!" cried Thirsk.  
"Ha!—who's this?"

The door had opened, and Agatha Thirsk had entered; but she had changed so much with her new troubles added to the old, that he could scarce believe it was his wife before him.

Very white, but very calm, she came with a steady step towards him, and looked him in the face.

"I take all the blame, Nicholas, but you will spare me now? It is God's judgment on my duplicity, but I cannot bear more than to know that I am justly punished."

"Don't you know that it is all my fault?" he said.

"How can it be yours? Oh! Nicholas, you will be calm, for our dear baby's sake—you will remember that my trial is much greater than your own, and that I am praying still for strength?"

"Can I see the boy?" he asked, hoarsely.

"The doctor says 'Yes.'"

They went out together, that strange, ill-matched couple, and left me in the drawing-room, thinking of all that might follow this night, and how one little life, or death, might influence all their after days. Sir Richard Freemantle did not return—the physician kept to his own room or the patient's—of Harriet Genny I saw nothing—only Mrs. Ricksworth's face suddenly peered round the door, and froze me with its ghastliness.

"Oh! I beg pardon—I thought Sir Richard was here."

"No—he is not here."

"Will you tell him John Simmons is going to drive me over to the Tramlingford gaol? I couldn't live the night out without seeing or hearing of the old man, now he's in such dreadful trouble. Oh! it's awful trouble, Sir, to come upon him at last!"

And the woman burst into tears, and struggled towards the first chair near the door, where she sat and rocked herself, and wrung her hands.

"I did my best for her and him, and all's gone contrary.

Though I say it that shouldn't, he was—no, I won't say it at all now ”

And this eccentric old woman sprung up, and darted out of the room. A few minutes afterwards I heard the wheels of a vehicle receding along the carriage drive. Presently Thirsk re-entered, pale and ghostly, like all the figures that flitted about the house that night.

“ Neider,” said he, dropping into the chair beside me, “ if the boy die, I shall end it all with a pistol-shot ! ”

“ Is that a fair resolve, Thirsk ? ”

“ It's my only one.”

“ You would cure trouble by a greater. Do you think your wife is of iron, that you would cast so awful a grief upon her in her bitterest hour ? ”

“ She will be happier without me.”

“ If he dies there is but one comfort left her. The power will rest with you to make amends for the great loss—it is in your own hands, Thirsk, to comfort her.”

“ It *was* ! I have thrown my power all away—I have lost it all by my accursed folly, and between man and wife is utter isolation. She will not grieve or sorrow for me, or any act of mine, now—I can read it in every word that passes her lips.”

“ She is in trouble. Patience.”

He crossed his arms upon his chest and looked down at his feet. He remained so long motionless that I thought he had fallen asleep, and touched him gently. He started, shook himself, made an effort to say a few words, and then went back to his own gloomy reverie, wherein no hope seemed lying beyond to lighten him. Watching him furtively, I wondered what was best for him in this turning-point of his career—for the boy to live and bring him back to better thoughts, or for the loss to draw him nearer to his wife, and from their common trouble evolve the new existence and the truer man ?

Later that night Mrs. Ricksworth returned, and went direct to her room. She passed me on the stairs, a firm old woman in the midst of all her trouble. She had been crying on her way home, but her eyes were tearless then.

“ Good-night, Sir.”

“Did you see your husband, Mrs. Ricksworth?”

“No; they wouldn’t let me, the hard-hearted wretches. He had heard the dreadful news before I reached there though, and it’s driven him clean, raving mad, as well it might—as well it might!”

She went up stairs, muttering these words over and over to herself, and I saw no more of her that night. I made inquiry for Harriet Genny after that, and learned she had gone back again, after the solemn visit to her dead cousin.

The impression began to deepen on me, that I should be better away from this house of mourning—that I had no right to stay there; but upon seeking Sir Richard and making known that wish, he begged me so earnestly not to leave the Hall yet, that I reluctantly consented to remain for a few days his guest.

“But can I do good here?” I said.

“Who can tell what good may follow your mediation, now my brother-in-law is in this house?”

He did not know that my mediation would not be required.

Very late that night there came the good news to the drawing-room that the child was conscious, and Thirsk started to his feet with a wild cry of exultation. To his life’s end he would be ever excitable, and easily changed.

“If he live—if he be only spared, I will never forget the lesson that this day has taught me!” he cried.

“Hush!—hush!—make no bargain with your Maker, Thirsk.”

“Neider, I am always wrong,” he cried.

Hope was dashed the next day by the news that fever had set in, and that an hour or two might end all dreams of such happiness as Thirsk had built on. Thirsk’s excitement took a new turn; it carried him, in defiance of all medical authority, into the sick child’s chamber, where he watched and nursed, and where the child clung to him as to the one friend he had missed in the affliction of his little life. And Thirsk changed from that hour; he assumed a calmer, graver attitude; became the tender, careful, watchful father, whose soul was in his son’s recovery,

but whose will was gathering strength to meet the blow, if it should be God's will to take the flower from him. Troubles such as these, I believe, change many men ; turn them from the wilfulness and wickedness of their hearts to thoughts of others—to hope, and prayer, and faith. Troubles that he had made greater by his own rashness, troubles that particularly affected him, Thirsk had always succumbed to, whilst apparently defying ; but this suffering of his little child's awakened in him a concern for others' griefs, and touched the chord—the true chord—that was rusting in a nature still reclaimable. A common trouble with his wife, which both could share and pray against, and which brought both together with thoughts and hopes in common, was salvation to him, and from the evil followed good and better things.

On the third day there came the good news for which all in that house anxiously prayed—the change for the better in the child.

Dr. Barford came into the room with a beaming face, which his skill might have helped to produce, but which a fee of a thousand pounds—a fee that does not fall in everybody's way—certainly helped to promote. Sir Richard Freemantle and I were in the drawing-room. Nicholas Thirsk entered immediately after the physician.

“Out of danger, Sir Richard—out of danger !”

“Thank God !”

The baronet started up, and shook the physician's hands heartily in his.

“I knew you would be pleased to pay that heavy fee you threatened me with,” he said, laughing.

How he did laugh ! So pleasantly and heartily, but with such a twinkling light in the eyes that met Sir Richard.

“And you shall have the fee, Sir. I am always as good as my word.”

“My de—ear Sir !” cried the physician, mildly deprecatory.

But he rubbed one white hand over the other, and looked excessively delighted when Sir Richard produced his cheque-book.

“Out of danger !” said Thirsk, an hour later ; “this is

a memorable night for me to look back upon, in the better future I have thought of."

"And resolved on," I added.

"Ever the right word, Neider."

He crossed the room, and held out his hand to the baronet.

"The first step that should have been made long since, Sir Richard," said he; "is it a hand worth taking, after all that has passed?"

"I hope so. My dear Nicholas, does Agatha know of this?"

"Not yet."

"Shall we go up together?"

"If you will—but here is one friend who must stand witness to my new faith. He has tried long, and arduously, and ineffectually to make me something like himself."

"But the boy——"

"Is asleep, and out of danger."

We went cautiously together into the boy's room. The young Thirsk was sleeping calmly—the mother, with her hands clasped together, in prayerful attitude, sat and watched her boy.

The danger was past him—the old life, full of danger to her, she was beginning to recoil from.

Our entrance alarmed her. She looked from one to the other, and seemed to dread a new disaster by our appearance there.

"Agatha, our old friend Neider has come to see the boy."

"He is sleeping. You will not touch him, Sir."

"I would not disturb him for the world."

"He has come to stand witness to our contract, wife."

"What is that?"

And she glanced timidly into her husband's face.

"To love and honour each other, until death, that has fled from our boy, shall part us for ever. To witness the dawn of the new life beginning for us both."

"Nicholas!—in earnest!" she exclaimed.

"God stands a witness, too, to that!"

She was in his arms and sobbing on his breast. The arms that held her to him trembled very much.

“ Shall I tell you what Mercy Ricksworth’s dying words were ? ” I said.

It seemed a strange question at that moment ; but Thirsk nodded.

“ ‘ If my dying—even her boy’s—could make her life more happy ! ’ And the boy is spared,” I added.

They were silent—reverent. On the threshold of the new life awaiting them they remembered the sleeper in that house, the faithful friend and servant, with whom the cares and troubles, joys and sorrows of all life on earth were over.



## CHAPTER IX.

“ FINIS.”

WERE they all the words of Mercy Ricksworth that I had treasured, or were there other words of value that woke up a vague hope in me once again ? When Mercy Ricksworth’s grave was green, I thought of them ; when the shadow of the Welsdon tragedy was less heavy on me, I let them trouble me.

It was winter then, and Grey and I were partners still. The world had changed with those whose lives had been strangely linked with mine ; the Freemantle estate had been sold, and Sir Richard was living in London, with his sister, his sister’s husband, and the child he called his heir. The new life had begun, and Thirsk’s steps were not faltering ; every step that led him on the brighter way indicated strength and resolution ; the private secretary-ship scheme had been discovered, or rather avowed, and Sir Richard and the brother-in-law worked no longer in the dark for and against each other. For Thirsk was

working upwards in the sunlight ! Mrs. Ricksworth was in my service—a fair and careful servant, and if a little crotchety and inclined to argue with her younger subordinates, still one who knew her place, and was strangely reverential to my mother, me and William Grey. Her husband was hopelessly mad in a lunatic asylum, and Ipps had been dead three months.

Harriet Genny and her uncle were still the tenants of the little cottage on the farm estate ; and Harriet was still repellent, as though a cruel past lay a barrier between us, that no labour of my own would ever surmount. But I had a new hope, born of Mercy's dying words—and it was cherished and held to my heart, despite the distance, vague and impenetrable. It made the life different round me—it brought back all that past, no longer cruel to me—the dear old days of Follingay, that hid a secret known, as she fancied, but to herself and God. If it were a secret in which I had been concerned—if it were only possible to be that secret—in the mists around me might be waiting much of happiness ! But she had married since the days at Follingay, and in her wifely duties set me for ever aside—it was just and right, and I had no claim upon her. Still she was not happy ; she had known no happiness in her wedded life, and beyond it. Free from the slavery of the ring—no more galling, cruel sign of bondage, when hearts have played no part in the contract, or played too wildly, and resolved themselves to ashes—she wore still the same look of discontent, of even inward fretfulness. And she was but two years my senior ; life was a long journey alone, and she had known nothing of true happiness. All the mistakes, privations, trials of an up-hill life had been hers, and it was in my power—I believed it was in my power—to chase them all away.

In the winter time I took counsel of Farmer Genny—told him the story of how long and patiently I had loved his niece, and laid bare the truth before him. He heard me to the end, wiped his eyes with the back of his hand, and gave vent to the most dolorous "ay" that had ever escaped him.

"Don't you give me hope, Genny?"

"Ye maun seek it for yourself. I doan't know what's in

her heart—I can only see there's trouble in it, which keeps her lonely enough, poor lass ! But, Mr. Neider—I ha' nothing to say again' the match—I'll—darned if I woan't jump for joy to see it, though it's taking her away from me ! ”

He did not jump for joy just then.

It was a hard fight to break through the wall of ice with which she was encompassed ; but I made the venture when her widowhood was twelve months old. Speaking of Mercy one night by the winter's fire, when Genny suddenly left us together, without any apparent motive for so doing, I told her of Mercy's last wish respecting both of us. Earnestly, rapidly, with a heart that plunged as in the old times under circumstances which were akin to this, I told the story, keeping back Mercy's suspicion of a truth that I could not, dare not expect her to confess. She was moved, and the tears fell like diamonds in the firelight ; but she would not listen when I pleaded for myself—told her of the love I had, and the better, purer love I sought.

“ Mr. Neider, I shall never marry again, to make a man's home unhappy, and to be shadowed myself by his want of sympathy in me and my pursuits. I am fitted for a single life, and I have promised myself that solitary solace.”

“ Another promise ! ” I cried, indignantly ; “ you who know the folly of such promises, made in the heat of passion, when the mind is troubled, and one cannot fairly estimate the right and wrong—you, Harriet ! ”

She coloured, but she stood on her defence still.

“ What do you know of my promises ? ” she said, with her dear old petulance predominant.

“ I do not know—I do not seek to know. It is of the present promise I am speaking now, and I would break it down. In shadowing your own life, have you a right to cast a blight on mine—have you the heart, Harriet, after all my years of love ? ”

“ You are a boy still—this is the boy's romance, and I will hear no more of it ! ”

“ *If I would try to make her happy, she who has thought of you so long !*  ” They were Mercy's words, that kept me strong, and I persisted. By the firelight I could see her

changing, and the tears still falling. What if her words were hard and seemed unyielding, when that red lip quivered, that bosom wildly heaved, and those eyes would shun my own? I was fighting for the past—the dear past again—and her impatience—her strange petulance, her little quick replies, were all fragments thereof wafting slowly back once more.

I knew it when she sobbed more violently, and her hand was in my own and shrank not.

And yet at the last she broke away, and stood trembling but defiant.

“You may go now,—I will hear no more !”

“And am I to go without a hope, Harriet?”

“I am a young widow still,” she said, almost fiercely ; “a year hence I shall be growing an old woman !”

“Give me that year to hope in !”

“You are a dreamer—you will ever be a child, without the courage or the patience to wait.”

*But I waited !*

THE END.





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